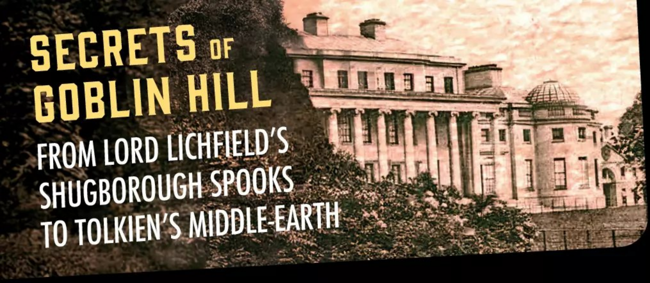

SECRETS OF GOBLIN HILL

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MALVERN	MALVERN THEATRES	22 -26 JULY
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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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ForteanTimes
PHANTOM MENACE
THE GHOST ARMY THAT FOOLED HITLER

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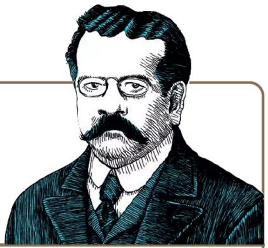
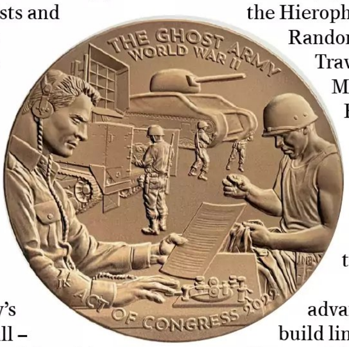


CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

PHANTOM MENACES

Welcome to our May issue where, with an eye on the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, Brian J Robb examines the largely unsung contribution of the US 'Ghost Army', an unlikely cadre of artists and illusionists dedicated to fooling Hitler's forces in the face of the Allies' final push to liberate the continent.

They were recently recognised with the award of a Gold Congressional Medal (pictured at right).



Ghosts of a different sort figure in Rob Gandy's visit to Shugborough Hall – not to mention goblins and the odd hobbit. Elsewhere, Jan Bondeson takes on the Welsh legend of the Robber's Grave, Chris Saunders greets the return to British shores of the cuckoo, SD Tucker marks the anniversary of Covid lockdowns and we welcome Mikita Brottman back to these pages as she ponders the popularity of murderous Mormons in modern TV schedules.

We hope that all this – not to mention the JFK files release, the Royal Mail's folkloric stamps, the opening of a new Cornish labyrinth and Bigfoot sightings in Cambridge (!) – helps enliven your month.

BOB RICKARD'S FT INDEXING UPDATE

The FT indexing project continues its assault upon the future at a snail's pace. The first phase (scanning many older back issues) was completed long ago. The second phase (generating word lists) is nearing the current project cut-off point of issue 400. Thanks to the small group of volunteers, we are in the last 50. The task of indexing newer issues and keeping up with the latest, I leave to some with energy and a suitably unexpired life-span. The third phase (translating the word lists into formatted entries into wiki-based index) awaits us. I am concentrating on Names first, before moving on to the more complicated section of Topics. There is still much work to be done here, including checking for omissions and missing pages; editing and validating entries to ensure their value (e.g. removing duplications and redundancies; and ensuring the uniformity of format-related coding).

I will make a further appeal for volunteers when I can be confident that we have a workable plan.

I'm also giving thought to the shape of this wiki-based index. Besides the main index there will also be full listing of Contents by Issue; as well as supplementary listings of articles and features (e.g. Phenomenomix, the Hierophant's Apprentice's Random Dictionary, Fortean Traveller, Classical Corner, Mythconceptions, Fairies Folklore & Forteana, Ghostwatch, Fortean Bureau of Investigation and Necrolog, among many other priceless topical series.

I am also taking advantage of HTML to build link-stubs into the coding at critical points. These will form a skeleton that could facilitate direct access to more detailed FT content and, thereby, a more dynamic information source (if not an actual FT Encyclopedia).

In the meantime, I could really benefit from advice from someone with HTML and Mediawiki experience as we build, shape and test the look and usage of the project. If that's you, please contact me at: ft-bobrickard@mail.com

PARANORMAL SURVEY

Dr Urszula Wolski is carrying out research on investigators of paranormal phenomena and is interested in hearing about your experiences and beliefs as an investigator, whether you are currently investigating or no longer doing so. What follows is a link to a brief questionnaire which shouldn't take longer than 10-15 minutes to complete, depending on your answers, and all responses are completely anonymous. Please scan the QR code to take part.

ERRATA

454:58: In this issue's Strange Statesmen entry a caption referred to "the bizarre logo on the Pearsons' car in which they intended to kidnap Essex Senior Coroner Lincoln Brookes". As Mark Harper wrote in to point out, the would-be kidnappers were actually his namesakes, Shaun and Shiza Harper. We have absolutely no idea who the Pearsons are, so apologies to them too.

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

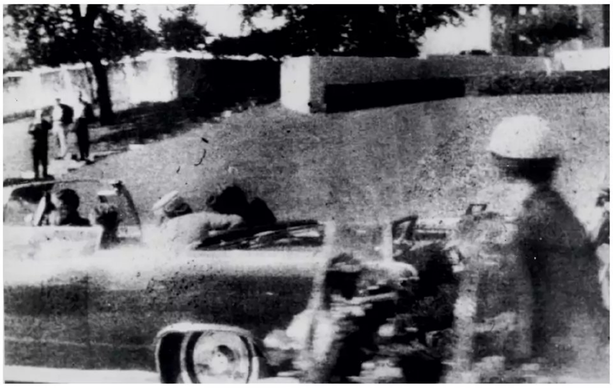
THE JFK FILES DROP

No smoking gun, but some interesting insights into the US intelligence services

One of Donald Trump's campaign promises was to release all the documents on the assassinations of President John F Kennedy, his brother Robert, and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, on "Day One" of his second presidency. All three deaths have been shrouded in conspiracy theories and allegations of state cover-up – one 2022 survey found that only 38 per cent of Americans believed the official story that JFK was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone – and campaigners on all three deaths have long urged the Government to come clean.

This proved to be one of the occasions when Trump was telling the absolute truth: on 23 January he signed Executive Order 14176 authorising all documents on the three assassinations to be released in unredacted form. This was not the first time that the release of the JFK documents has been ordered; President George HW Bush ordered the declassification of all records relating to the assassination by October 2017. Many were released in redacted form, although during his first presidency, Trump signed an order to hold back some on national security grounds, as did President Biden, although Biden did release another 13,000 documents, many still with redactions.

The first records to drop following Trump's Executive Order were the eagerly awaited files on the JFK assassination, released by the National Archives on 18 March. These consisted of around 2,200 files containing more than 63,000 pages of information, although Jefferson Morley of the Mary Ferrell Foundation, a nonprofit that keeps a database of government records on the JFK assassination, claimed that only "two-thirds" of the promised documents had been released; he said that 2,400 recently found by the FBI were missing, as were more than 500 from Internal Revenue Service records. Many documents released had been seen previously, but are now available without redactions. They were released in a variety of formats, primarily as PDFs, which made running searches on them difficult, but assassination researchers and conspiracy afficionados immediately began combing them for revelations. One thing that became immediately obvious was that there weren't any, or at least none that were easy to discover.



> *"I don't really see anything to change the narrative"*

The documents provided nothing that challenged the conventional "lone gunman" narrative and nothing to justify any of the conspiracy theories. "I didn't really see anything to change the narrative indicating that Oswald as the lone gunman was the person who killed John F Kennedy and that it was not the result of a conspiracy," said Marc Selverstone, professor in presidential studies at the University of Virginia. Primarily, the files fleshed out what government agencies knew about Oswald and gave greater insight into the tactics of the various intelligence services at the time, as well as the rivalries between them, and the administration's concerns about their covert activities.

The documents confirm that Oswald did visit both the Cuban and Soviet embassies in Mexico City before the assassination, and that the KGB held files on him dating from the period when he briefly defected to Moscow, but that a review of these after the fall of the Soviet Union gave no indication that he was ever a KGB agent, although they did suggest he was a poor shot. The documents also reveal that the CIA monitored Oswald's mail when he returned to the US, as part of a systematic programme of mail monitoring and tampering, but without finding anything to cause alarm. More interesting perhaps is the information revealed about CIA operations; it turns out that later Watergate burglar and wiretapper James McCord invented a technique known as "fluoroscopic scanning", which was deemed a major breakthrough in hidden microphone detection, and that the CIA spied on the French government, infiltrating their intelligence services. Additionally, they contemplated poisoning Cuban sugar bound for Russia as part of "Operation Mongoose", a campaign of covert operations and sabotage against Cuba. The CIA also used an FBI agent to find women for visiting foreign dignitaries in the hope of gathering intelligence, and seem to have provided the weapons used to assassinate former President of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo. We also find out that the Kennedy administration felt the CIA were running their own independent foreign policy and were undermining the State Department, causing them to consider breaking it up.

This is pretty small beans, though, and nothing that is exactly surprising. Certainly, it seems that if there was a paper trail for anything more suspicious, it was eradicated with great efficiency long ago. David Barrett, a Villanova University historian, said: "Whenever there is an assassination there will be debates and to some degree there will be conspiracy theories; that's not going to change because of these or any other documents." *independent.co.uk, 19 Mar; BBC News, aljazeera.com, 20 Mar 2025; news.sky.com, 24 Mar; centreforpolitics.org, 25 Mar 2025.*

GOBLINS AND WITCHES

Demonic doings and magical mayhem

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WHILE ROME BURNS

A collection of classical conflagrations

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FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

Cat shavers, fake gorillas and food flingers

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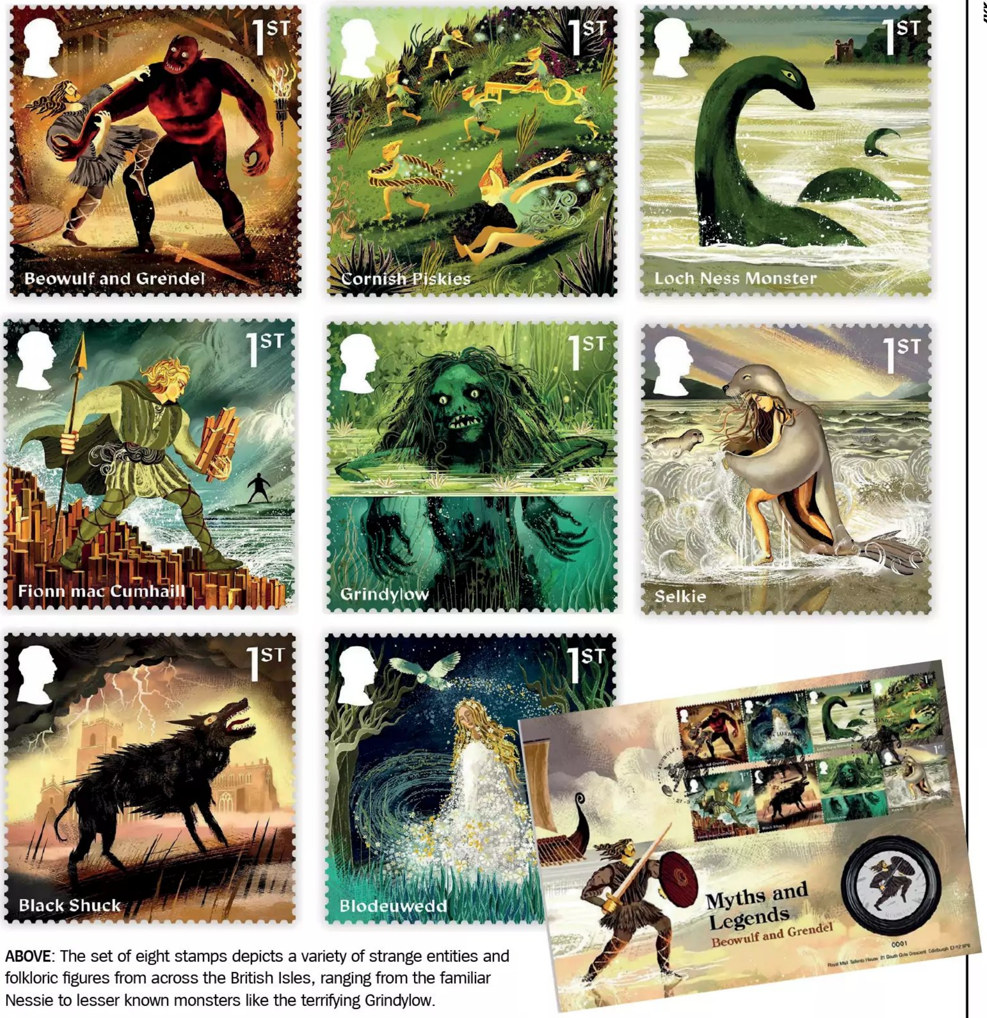
STAMPS OF MYSTERY

The Royal Mail celebrates British folklore and legend



ROYAL MAIL

ABOVE: The set of eight stamps depicts a variety of strange entities and folkloric figures from across the British Isles, ranging from the familiar Nessie to lesser known monsters like the terrifying Grindylow.

On 27 March, Royal Mail launched a set of stamps celebrating British myths and legends, which they describe as "a fascinating aspect of British culture and custom". They show entities from across Britain, including Nessie, Beowulf and Fionn mac Cumhaill and while some are well known, the Grindylow, a dangerous river sprite from Yorkshire and Lancashire, and Blodeuwedd, a woman created from flowers in the Welsh Mabinogion, may be less familiar to the general public. The artist behind the stamps, Adam Simpson, says "I think it's important to celebrate where these stories come from; each one is associated with a region, and each one has its own identity, and together they demonstrate our rich mythological heritage." This is not the first time Royal Mail has issued stamps showing mythical creatures; in 2009 they issued a set featuring dragons, giants, fairies, pixies, mermaids and unicorns, illustrated by comics artist Dave McKean. *BBC News, 20 Mar 2025.*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

PETROL STATION BLACK PUDDING GIVES LESSON ABOUT KARMA

Irish Times, 24 July 2024.

18 opera-goers need medical treatment after lesbian Hindemith opera

slippedisc.com, 10 Oct 2024.

TEN YEARS TO END ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

Metro, 25 Sept 2024.

Farmers angry about Dutch cheese in schools

Irish Times, 30 Oct 2024.

AUSTRALIAN WOMAN ADMITS TRYING TO SELL HUMAN TOES SHE FOUND IN DOG VOMIT

Economist, 25 May 2024.

SIDELINES

ROAD GHOUL

A spate of road accidents on Highway 36 in Bennington, Nebraska, have been caused by random objects left in the middle of the road, and after each one the same mystery man has shown up and offered the victims assistance, vanishing before emergency services arrive. Kyle Sorenson said that after his car hit a child's bike inexplicably lying in the road the man "pulled up behind me saying he was checking to make sure we were okay," but was then seen pouring oil onto the road before leaving. Police said they had multiple reports of objects in the road, adding: "We have a potential suspect in mind". *Independent.co.uk, 14 Dec 2024.*

TALKING TURKEY

On the first day of the spring turkey hunting season in Oklahoma, a man from Indiana was shot while out hunting with friends. Police said the victim, who was not seriously injured, had been clothed head to toe in camouflage while making turkey sounds, making him more likely to be mistaken for game by other hunters. *ktul.com, 21 Apr 2024.*

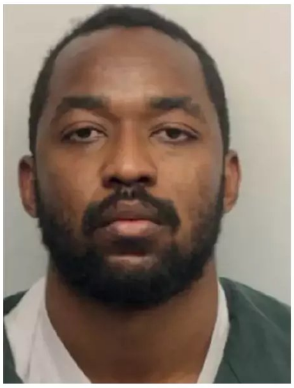
PARAKEET ORIGIN?

In recent years London has become home to flocks of colourful green parakeets and there has been much speculation as to where they originated, with proposals ranging from aviary escapes in the 1987 storm to a deliberate release by Jimi Hendrix. The *Newark Advertiser*, though, recorded a feral green parakeet 100 years ago. In their 17 September 1924 edition they note that one which "flies with the speed of a snipe" was to be seen regularly accompanying a flock of sparrows in Staythorpe, Nottinghamshire. *Newark Advertiser, 19 Sept 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

GOBLINS & WITCHES

Magical mayhem and demonic doings around the world



ABOVE LEFT: A smuggled 'goblin' apprehended by the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Delange Augustin.

GOBLINS AGAIN

In Zimbabwe, the goblin panic (**FT444:4-5, 448:22**) continues. Three families in the Bulawayo suburb of St Peters claim to have been besieged by goblins that behave in a poltergeist-like manner and repeatedly pelt their houses with stones, often smashing windows. As a result, two of the three families have fled.

Lister Tshuma, the landlord of Xolani Mlalazi, whose family is one of those who has abandoned their property, described what had happened: "Recently, while we were having supper, our tenants burst into our living room, screaming that they were being stoned. They told us that one of the doors had been flung open and stones rained into the room, forcing them to flee." She explained that: "The tenants joined forces with my daughter and other community members to exorcise the place through prayer. But they returned running, terrified, because the invisible creatures were throwing stones at them." Sipanthisiwe Moyo, whose family was also attacked said: "The invisible creature empties sugar and mealie meal on the floor. We do not know what to do because it also eats our meat. This situation has plunged our lives into a crisis and filled us with fear." A woman named NaMolly, from the third family affected, said that the goblins were removing her underwear while she slept, but did not believe they had sexually assaulted her so far. "This thing is troubling me, and I am living in fear that it will eventually rape me. When I sleep, I do not remove my underwear, but surprisingly, for the last three days, I have woken up in the morning to find it on the floor." The area chairperson, Reginald Mkhosana, said that he did not want to call in witch hunters, but was going to convene a community meeting to plan a strategy to eradicate the goblins, probably involving having a pastor or prophet cleanse the village.

While families in Bulawayo are making efforts to get rid of goblins, others are trying to bring them into the country as they are believed to bring wealth and power to anybody controlling one. The Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA), who operate the country's customs checks, hit the headlines when they announced that they had discovered a kind of goblin known as a "Chidhoma" among goods being smuggled in from South Africa, releasing a video showing the thing, which appears to be a stuffed, hair-covered bag, sewn with human teeth, sitting among items removed from a confiscated backpack. *sundaymail.co.zw, 22 Sept 2024; gambakwe.com, 7 Feb 2025.*

DEMONS ON A PLANE

An American Airlines flight from Savannah, Georgia, to Miami in Florida, was forced to turn back after take-off when a passenger, 31-year-old Delange Augustin, started "yelling and shaking". At first cabin staff thought he was having a medical emergency, but it became clear that Delange was freaking out because he felt there was some kind of "demonic spirit" on the plane with him, and had been swallowing rosary beads to protect himself from what he described as "Satan's disciples". He then attacked crew members and had to be restrained by other passengers until police could remove him from the plane on landing. His sister was with him and explained that this was meant to be the first leg of a journey to Haiti, where Delange was going to "flee religious attacks of a spiritual nature". *thedailybeast.com, 12 Mar 2025.*

WEDDING WITCHERY

Bride-to-be Riri Montillano was arranging her wedding in Mindanao, the Philippines. Unusually, she had managed to book a hotel and secure wedding suppliers without paying any deposit and, right up to the last minute, insisted that her parents would settle everything on arrival. On the day of the wedding, they had still not appeared and Montillano started to behave oddly. Despite the tradition that a bride should not see the groom on the day until the ceremony, when he arrived, Montillano never let him out of her sight. When anyone asked them questions, it was Montillano who answered, while the unnamed

TAOS COUNTY COUPLE ADMIT TO KILLING MISSING MAN

ABOVE LEFT: Wedding scammer Riri Montillano. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Taos murderers Aram Montoya and Desiree Lensegrav.

groom remained silent and appeared to be in a trance-like state. Two hours before the ceremony, hotel staff became even more concerned when it transpired there were to be no guests at the wedding, although just before it started several friends of the groom did arrive. However, instead of taking part in the ceremony, one of them stepped forward and threw a handful of salt at the groom's back. The man immediately roused from his apparent trance and looked around in bewilderment, asking "Where am I? What's happening?" He seemed to have no recollection of how he got there, and no idea that he was about to be married. Police then arrested Montillano for using a local love spell known as *gayuma* to bewitch the groom and trick him into marriage – in local traditions salt is believed to be able to break spells. After this, hotel staff wondered whether Montillano had also bewitched them in order to secure their services without the usual deposit. *ibtimes.com, 12 Mar 2025.*

AMERICAN BLOOD WITCH

The New Mexico Supreme Court overturned Desiree Lensegrav's conviction for murder, citing "outrageous prosecutorial misconduct", which included the prosecutor, Assistant District Attorney Ripol, accusing her of being a witch. She had originally been sentenced to 45 years in prison for helping her husband, Aram Montoya, to kidnap and murder a man named Joseph Morgas in 2019, after which they burned, decapitated and buried Morgas's body, throwing his head into the Rio Grande. Once arrested, though, the couple turned on each other and Montoya made lurid claims about Lensegrav's use of witchcraft to control him. Ripol repeated these accusations in his preliminary address to the jury, which the Supreme Court deemed "inflammatory and inadmissible evidence".

Among the claims Ripol made were that Lensegrav was a "witch" and a "*bruja*" who controlled Mr Montoya through her menstrual blood, telling the court he intended to produce a witness who would testify that he saw Lensegrav's eyes turn "black with fury and rage". Apparently when this happened the witness "could feel the wind coming out of her". Ripol told the jury that his witness would also testify "that [Montoya] was like a zombie when he was around her. And that [the Defendant] suggested… on several occasions that she was a witch and that she would put menstrual blood concoctions into [Montoya's] food to control him".

In support of his accusations, Ripol also "introduced "foul-smelling physical evidence" from the victim's remains, leading the judge to adjourn the trial early during the second day to allow the stench to dissipate. The Supreme Court ruled that the "trial was filled with theatrics, hyperbole and disparaging inflammatory statements, such that the extent of the misconduct cannot be fully conveyed in this opinion," resulting in Lensegrav walking free under double jeopardy rules, while Montoya received a sentence of life imprisonment without parole for his part in the crime. *santafenewmexican.com, 21 Feb; abovethelaw.com, 24 Feb 2025.*

LIVE AT THE WITCH TRIALS

In Zambia, a witch trial has been dominating the news. Two men, Leonard Phiri, 43, a Zambian, and Jasten Mabulesse Candunde, 42, a Mozambican, have been accused of practising witchcraft and possessing charms intended to harm the country's president. They were arrested in Zambia's capital, Lusaka, in December after a cleaner reported hearing "strange noises" from their room. This led to a police search that discovered a bottled chameleon, 14 containers of traditional medicine, a mysterious white powder, a red cloth and an unidentified animal's tail, which also earned them a charge of animal cruelty. After their arrest, it is alleged that the men admitted they had been hired to put a lethal curse on President Hakainde Hichilema by a brother of Emmanuel Banda, a former MP now on the run after escaping from prison where he was awaiting trial on robbery charges. Some, though, have suggested it is a stunt by Hichilema to gain sympathy and boost his chances in a forthcoming election, although Hichilema himself was accused of using magic to help oust his predecessor, Michael Sata. The trial was scheduled to be televised, only the second time this has been done in Zambia, but this was cancelled after Zambia's influential Council of Churches opposed the broadcast. Journalist Enoch Ngoma said the case had received a high profile because Zambians take witches seriously, with 79 per cent believing in their existence. *bbc.co.uk/news, 22 Nov 2024; independent.co.uk, 24 Feb; aa.com.tr, 18 Feb 2025.*

SIDELINES

CRUNCHY

The Sportsman Inn in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, held the world's first crisp festival last October, offering 70 different varieties from around the world, with beer pairings. "I'll pair a classic Seabrooks cheese and onion with Timothy Taylor's Boltmaker – it's all about terroir, local products working together," says landlord John Fletcher. "There's a delicious tomato flavoured crisp from China and I'm pairing that with a Gueuze." Salted egg yolk flavour, also from China, proved popular, as well as caviar, kimchi, and oyster and vinegar. Fletcher's favourite though was the Golden Wonder chip shop curry flavour crisp. *BBC News, 19 Oct 2024.*

NAME!

For 2024, Canterbury Cathedral revived a 600-year-old tradition of holding a Christmas market in its precincts, overseen by Simon Yule, the cathedral's visitor experience manager. *BBC News, 24 Oct 2024.*

DEFINITELY NEEDS GLASSES

Police arrested a Chinese man, identified only as Su, at a market in Bangkok, Thailand, when he attempted to buy a pair of spectacles with a 1,000-baht banknote prominently stamped "COPY". He was found to be carrying 95 1,000-baht notes, all with the same serial number and all stamped "COPY" in English on the back. Su maintained that he did not know the notes were fakes. *bangkokpost.com, 28 Oct 2024.*

STUCK

While on a hike with friends in the Hunter Valley in New South Wales, Australia, Matilda Campbell dropped her phone into a three metre (10ft) deep crevice. Attempting to retrieve it, she too fell in, ending up jammed head down in the narrow gap. It took emergency services seven hours to extract her in a rescue described as "challenging". This involved winching a 500kg (1,100lb) rock out of the way, then wangling Campbell out of an S-shaped gap in which she had become wedged. Amazingly, Campbell emerged from her ordeal with scratches and bruising, but no serious injuries; her phone was not retrieved. *theguardian.com, 22 Oct 2024.*

SIDELINES...

CASH COWS

When metal detectorist Keith Philips showed farmer Marilyn Birch, 76, from Pontardawe, Wales, some coins he'd found, she jokingly said "never mind this old rubbish, go and find my engagement ring," which she had lost 54 years before while feeding cows. Philips took her at her word, and shortly after returned with the ring. "I couldn't believe it, I was speechless," Birch said. Over the border in Shropshire, another detectorist found farmer James Steele's Rolex 50 years after he lost it while tending a cow. "The cow could have eaten it with a mouthful of grass," explained Steele, who described the watch's discovery after all this time as "amazing". *D.Express, 2 May, BBC News, 18 Jun 2024.*

FLYING SQUAD?

Officers at Bicester police station in Oxfordshire were left "a little bit confused" when they were repeatedly disturbed by the sounds of a car siren when all their vehicles were parked, leading to a search for technical faults. Eventually they discovered a bird sitting in a nearby tree that had perfected a siren impression "so accurate" it was fooling even the police. "100% real and NOT a late April Fool's joke," they posted on social media. *BBC News, 11 Apr 2024.*

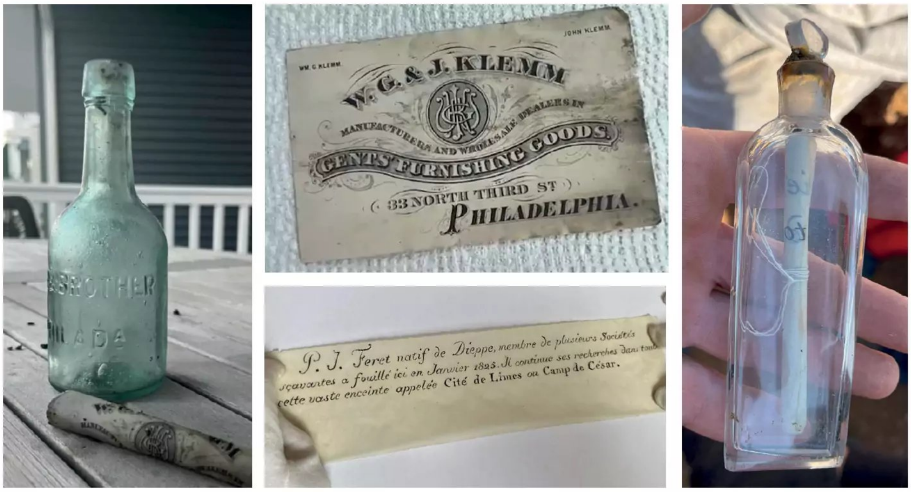
LOST IN TRANSLATION

The Football Association of Ireland had to issue an apology to the Latvian Under 21 team following a game against the Ireland Under 21s. The match programme was published with errors in the names of several Latvian team members: Bruno Melnis was credited as "Bruno the Black", while Gleb Patika came out as "Gleb Liked It" and Dario Sits ended up as "Dario Shit". *Irish Times, 16 Sept 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

Some surprising missives from bygone days



WM. G. KLEMM

JOHN KLEMM

W. G. & J. KLEMM

MANUFACTURERS AND WHOLESALE DEALERS IN

GENTS' FURNISHING GOODS,

33 NORTH THIRD ST

PHILADELPHIA.

P. J. Feret natif de Dieppe, membre de plusieurs Sociétés sçavantes a fouillé ici en Janvier 1825. Il continue ses recherches dans tou cette vaste enceinte appelée Cité de Limes ou Camp de César.

AMY SMYTH MURPHY

GUILLAUME BLONDEL

ABOVE LEFT: The bottle found by Amy Smyth Murphy and the business card it contained (top). **ABOVE RIGHT**: The bottle discovered during a dig in Normandy; its message (above) was from a previous excavator of the site in 1825.

On 2 January 2021, beachcomber Seonaid McGurk from Monifieth near Dundee, in Scotland, found an unusual bottle during a beach clean. It contained a business card reading "HOUSE OF COMMERCIALS The Farmers Arms Hotel Prop J M Finch (?) Penny Street Lancaster Telephone 2996(?)". McGurk says, "It is difficult to make out the name and telephone number as there is a bit of water damage. The other side of the card in the bottle says: '*Fully Licensed * Restaurant TV Garage Quality Lunches Teas Dinners with Party Catering a Specialty Comfort, H & C and Heating all Rooms'."

Considering how long it might have been in the water, McGurk says: "From the style of the print, I would think it probably dates back to the 1960s when the White Cross Inn and Farmers Arms were converted into the public house and hotel." She adds that "I have found other messages in bottles since, but this one is extremely well travelled in comparison to the others which have only come a few miles before washing up on the beach here." Assuming the bottle entered the sea near Lancaster on England's west coast, it would have to have travelled round the north of Scotland to reach Dundee in the east of Scotland. *lancasterguardian.co.uk, 14 Mar 2024.*

The bottle and its message probably date back to 1876

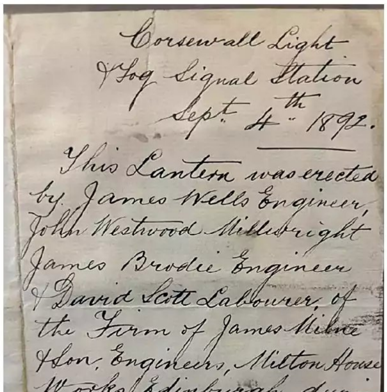
● The message Amy Smyth Murphy, 49, found in a bottle while walking along a beach at Corson's State Inlet in Ocean City, New Jersey, had spent a lot longer in the water. "I just thought, 'This is so peculiar. What is this?'" she said, and after some research, found that the bottle and its message probably date back to 1876. The bottle was branded "Barr & Brother Philadelphia" in a style produced between 1870 and 1900, while inside was a business card for a Philadelphia instrument company called WG & J Klemm that could be dated to the 1870s, narrowing the dates down a good deal.

The final clue was a barely legible handwritten note on the back of the card reading "Yacht *Neptune* off Atlantic City, New Jersey. Aug. 6 – 76" which suggests an 1876 date. Smyth Murphy also managed to track down the *Neptune*, finding a *Philadelphia Inquirer* article from 1874 which refers to a Captain Samuel Gale of Atlantic City who had "just built a splendid yacht, which he christened *Neptune*, after the Neptune Club of this city". "We are getting closer to finding out who wrote the note and who threw the bottle in the ocean," Smyth Murphy said. She believes this could qualify as the oldest-ever message in a bottle, as Guinness World Records gives the record to one originating on 12 June 1886, when it was set adrift by German captains aboard the barque *Paula* and found at Wedge Island, Australia, in 2018. *dailymail.co.uk, 25 Jul 2024.*

● Do messages in bottles have to be found at sea? If not, one discovered at an archæological site in France would effortlessly trump the New Jersey find, as it dates from 1825. Archæologists carrying out an emergency dig at an ancient Gaulish clifftop village near the town of Eu in Normandy, threatened by erosion, turned up a message left by a predecessor who had surveyed the site nearly 200 years before. He had buried an earthenware pot there, with a glass flask inside, containing a neatly written message reading "PJ Féret, a native of Dieppe, member of various intellectual societies, carried out excavations here in January

1825. He continues his investigations in this vast area known as the *Cité de Limes* or *Caesar's Camp.*" Team leader Guillaume Blondel said, "It was an absolutely magic moment – we knew there had been excavations here in the past, but to find this message from 200 years ago… it was a total surprise," adding, "Sometimes you see these time capsules left behind by carpenters when they build houses, but it's very rare in archæology. Most archæologists prefer to think that there won't be anyone coming after them because they've done all the work!" *foxnews.com, 21 Sept 2024*

NORTHERN LIGHTHOUSE BOARD



Corsewall Light
& Fog Signal Station
Sept. 4th 1892.
This Lantern was erected
by James Wells Engineer
John Westwood Millwright
James Brodie Engineer
& David Scott Labourer, of
the Firm of James Milne
& Son, Engineers, Milton House
Works, Edinburgh, durin
the

LEFT: The bottle found in the walls of Corsewall Lighthouse, with the message it contained and a photo of the keepers who wrote it in 1892.

- Not quite as old, but still impressive, was a 132-year-old message found in a bottle left deep within the walls of the Corsewall Lighthouse on the Rhins of Galloway in Scotland. The 8in (20cm) bottle was found by Ross Russell, a Northern Lighthouse Board mechanical engineer, during an inspection. He had removed panels in a cupboard, revealing the bottle, but it was well out of arm's reach, so he rigged up a makeshift device to retrieve it using a rope and a broom handle.

Described as a "once in a lifetime" find, it is the first message in a bottle to be discovered in a lighthouse in Scotland. The bottle was made of coarse glass, full of tiny air bubbles, and has a convex base so cannot stand upright. It is thought to have once contained oil used to light the lamps before electricity. The letter inside was dated 4 September 1892 and was written using quill and ink. It reads: "This lantern was erected by James Wells Engineer, John Westwood Millwright, James Brodie Engineer, David Scott Labourer, of the firm of James Milne & Son Engineers, Milton House Works, Edinburgh, during the months from May to September and relighted on Thursday night 15th Sept. 1892. The following being keepers at the station at this time, John Wilson Principal, John B Henderson 1st assistant, John Lockhart 2nd assistant." The men had been installing a Fresnel lens in the lighthouse to improve the visibility of its beam, and coincidentally Russell's team were also working on the Fresnel lenses. "It was just a strange coincidence to find the note while working on the equipment described on the note," Russell said. Barry Miller, the current lighthouse keeper, said, "It was so exciting, it was like meeting our colleagues from the past. It was actually like them being there. You knew what they had done. You knew they had hidden it in such a place it wouldn't be found for a long, long time." Once they completed their work, the team planned to replace the note and bottle where they had found them, as well as adding another of their own. *BBC News, 9 Nov; nypost.com, 27 Nov 2024.*

- The Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies in Corpus Christi, Texas, combs south Texas beaches as part of a project to raise awareness of what is washing out of the Gulf, and have been collecting a particular kind of "message in a bottle" found on the Gulf coast. These are "witch bottles" suspected of originating in the Caribbean and South America. "I've found around eight of these bottles and never opened one. I have five of them on my fence in the backyard since my wife won't let me bring them inside," said Jace Tunnell from the Institute. "I don't believe they are coming from the US," Tunnell says, adding, "We do find items washing up from all over the world due to the ocean currents, and sometimes I find these bottles in debris that contains distinct yellow vinegar bottles that originate from Haiti."

As with the traditional witch bottles found in the UK, these witch, or spell, bottles are intended to "draw in and trap harmful intentions directed at their owners". But while the British ones contain things like iron nails, rusty pins, hair and urine, these appear to contain mostly "herbs, sticks and leaves". Tunnell says that "Evil spells could be fended off by trapping them in a 'witch bottle,' which if properly prepared, could actually reflect the spell itself while also tormenting the witch, leaving the witch with no option but to remove the spell allowing the victim to recover." He leaves the bottles unopened as their creators believe that opening them would end their protection and unbind the witch. *amp.bnd.com, 20 Nov 2023.*

SIDELINES…

OK, FINE

After Google restricted Russian state media channels on YouTube following the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government took them to court. They declared the local subsidiary bankrupt and fined Google two undecillion roubles - a two followed by 36 zeroes. This is equivalent to $20,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, not only considerably more than the $2 trillion Google is worth, but also more than the value of the entire world economy, which is estimated to be $110 trillion. *BBC News, 31 Oct 2024.*

FLORIDA WOMAN

Florida Highway Patrol pulled over Laura Riley, 41, in St Petersburg on suspicion of drunk driving and on searching the car discovered a bag prominently labelled "Bag of Drugs". This contained cocaine, crack, crystal meth, hydromorphone, amphetamines and alprazolam, plus an assortment of well-used drug paraphernalia, resulting in Riley's arrest on a variety of charges. *abcnews4.com, 31 Jul 2024.*

MAXIMUS JOY

Pembrokeshire Island Boat Trips in Milford Haven, Wales, has been unable to use one of its small yellow dinghies for more than 10 years; it has been commandeered almost daily by one of the harbour's resident seals, whom they have named Maximus. Rather than try and drive him away, the company has accepted his presence. "He's our resident seal," says company spokesperson Gareth Reynolds. *<i>, 8 Aug 2024.*

BENSON AND HEDGE

Argentinian river police patrolling the Paraguay and Paraná river confluence on the border between Argentina and Paraguay spotted a strange mass of floating vegetation moving across the river. "No-one had ever seen a plant like that floating so fast on top of the waterline and it made them take a closer look," said a police spokesperson. Officers found a man in a wetsuit pushing 200 packs of "Rodeo King Size" cigarettes across the river in a waterproof box, hidden under a wire mesh covered with artificial leaves. He was promptly hauled out and arrested for smuggling. *dailymail.co,uk, 12 Nov 2024.*

SIDELINES...

DUMPLING DISORDER

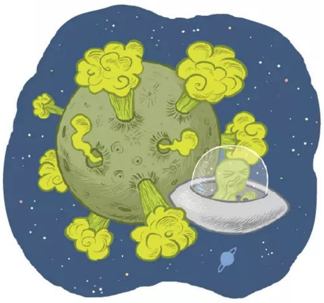
A social media posting by four Chinese university students who cycled 50km (30 miles) from Zhengzhou to Kaifeng to try guantangbao soup dumplings swiftly snowballed, with more and more young people making the trip using rental bikes. Dubbed the "Night Ride to Kaifeng", it was initially encouraged by Kaifeng, but soon thousands of cyclists were causing gridlock on the roads and crowding in city streets. Chinese authorities cracked down, closing highways, imposing curfews and banning hire bikes from leaving Zhengzhou, but one participant said "People are so stressed these days, so these events are a good thing, because happiness is infectious." *BBC News, 11 Nov 2024.*

OVER-EGGING IT

After placing his egg order ready for Easter, Dan Dafydd was expecting 80 Easter eggs to turn up at his shop, Sinclair General Stores on the isle of Sanday in the Orkneys. When the delivery arrived, he found he had, in fact, ordered 80 cases of Easter eggs, 720 in all, enough to give the 494 islanders one and a half eggs each. Undaunted, Dafydd decided to raffle the egg surplus in aid of the RNLI, attracting worldwide attention, covering the cost of his over-order and generating a huge donation to the lifeboats. *news.sky.com, 20 Mar 2024.*

PLANET OF THE FARTS

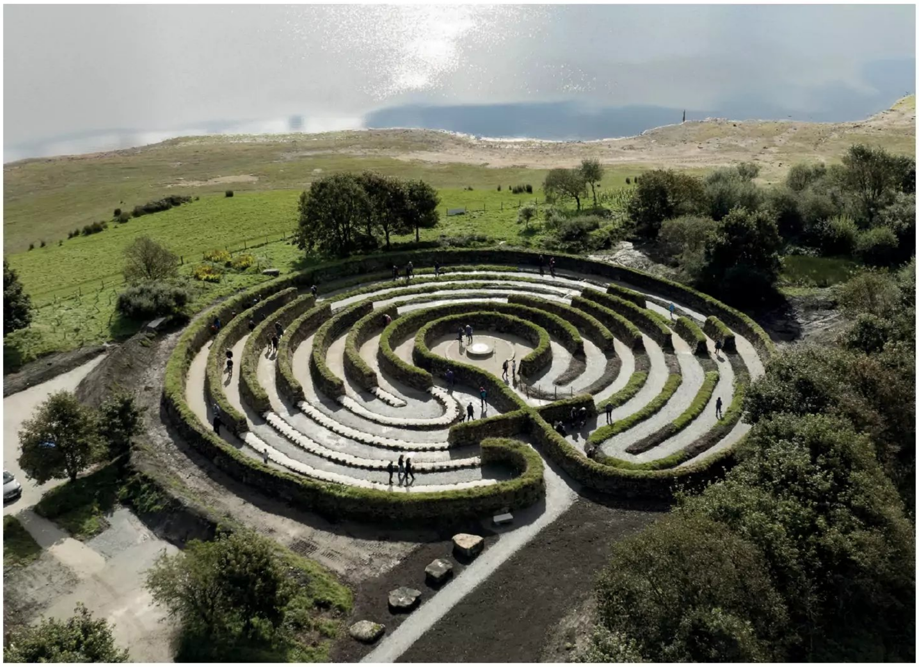
Astronomers have discovered a new planet orbiting a star 64 light years from Earth. Snappily named HD189733, it is the size of Jupiter but orbits its star closer in than Mercury orbits our Sun. It has surface temperatures of nearly 1000°C, winds of 8000 km/h (5000mph) and an atmosphere rich in hydrogen sulphide; so the entire planet is likely to smell of farts. *Irish Independent, 9 Jul 2024.*

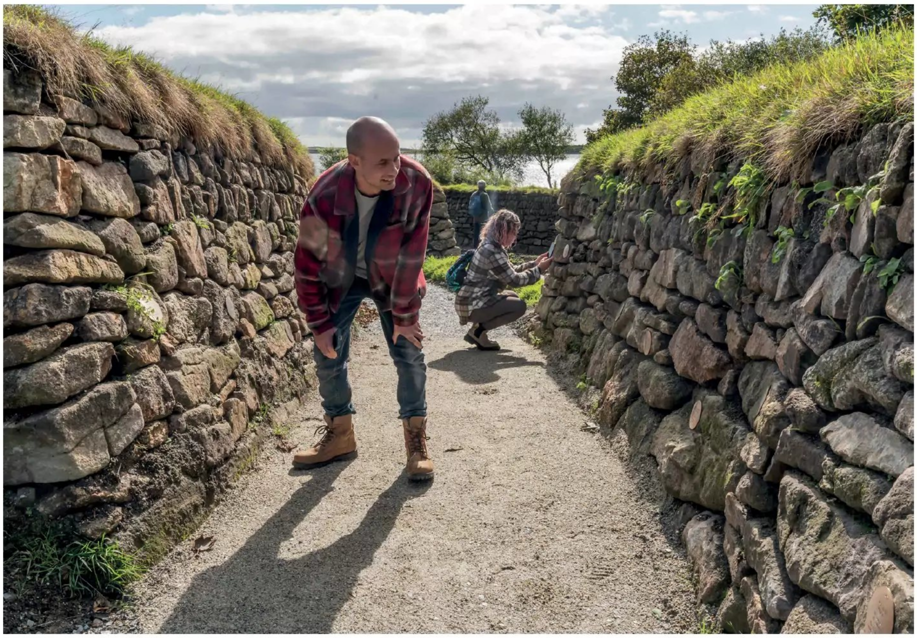


MARTIN ROSS

CORNISH LABYRINTH

The ancient craft of hedging returns





PHOTOS: GOLDENTREE.ORG.UK

The world's largest labyrinth has opened to the public (admission is free) on a site near Colliford Lake on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall. Fifty six metres (184ft) in diameter, the Kerdroya Cornish hedge labyrinth has taken five years to create and showcases artisan dry stone walling topped with turf, or hedging as it is known locally, from across Cornwall. It has been created as an "enduring legacy" to Cornish hedging by cultural entrepreneur Will Coleman, who claims it could last for 4,000 years. The labyrinth includes sections made from Bodmin Moor granite, serpentine stone from the Lizard, and West Penwith stone, with a centrepiece that is a miniature representation of the labyrinth itself, made of steel and copper, on a round plinth of solid granite. *cornwalllive.com, 10 Mar 2025.*

ARCHÆOLOGY A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL SIEVEKING finds evidence of the world's oldest ritual and some early European drug use

AUSTRALIAN SORCERY

Archæology probes the deep past, while oral tradition recounts tales from recent ancestors. Now, a discovery from an Australian cave brings the two together: a 12,000-year-old archæological find that matches 19th century accounts of Aboriginal sorcery practices – rituals that may have involved taking pieces of an intended victim's hair or clothing, affixing them to the end of a stick smeared with human or kangaroo fat, and casting them into a fire. The discovery may represent the oldest known, culturally transmitted ritual – one that persisted among local people from the last Ice Age to colonial times, according to a study published in *Nature Human Behaviour*.

GUNAIKURNAI LAND AND WATERS ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

ABOVE LEFT: GunaiKurnai Elder Russell Mullett and Monash University's Professor Bruno David in Cloggs cave where evidence of the oldest known ritual in the world has been found. **ABOVE RIGHT**: One of the ritual sticks.

The discoveries were made in Cloggs Cave in southeastern Australia. Nestled into a limestone outcrop overlooking the grassy foothills of the Australian Alps, the cave extends about 12m (39ft) underground and preserves a long record of Aboriginal culture. In a series of discoveries spanning about 23,000 years, archæologists have found ceremonial arrangements of stones, broken stalactites, a small grindstone, patches of calcite powder, and quartz crystals.

In 2020, a team cleaned the edges of a partially collapsed pit left behind by excavators half a century earlier. As the scientists exposed a cross-section of earth, they noticed the edge of a wooden stick buried in the sediments. They sliced off a bit of wood, sent the sample to the lab for radiocarbon dating, and discovered it was about 12,000 years old. Intrigued, the researchers began to slowly excavate a small square, some 50 by 50cm (20x20in), to uncover the stick. As they carefully removed sediment with trowels and brushes, they found a second stick in younger sediments a few centimetres above the first one. Radiocarbon dating revealed that piece was about 11,000 years old. More investigation produced a fuller picture: Both sticks lay across miniature fireplaces – palm-size enclosures of stones with ashes of grass and twigs that appeared to have burned only briefly. The sticks, the older one about 40cm (16in) long and the younger one about half that length, came from two species of *Casuarina*, flowering pine trees native to Australia with a long history of ceremonial use. In the lab, researchers found both pieces of wood had been stripped of their branches, smeared with human or animal fat, and slightly burned at the tips. The two sticks are the oldest wooden artefacts discovered in Australia.

As the evidence piled up, the researchers found bygone ethnographic texts that put everything in context. In 1887, government geologist Alfred Howitt described rituals of the sorcerers whom the local people called *mulla-mullung*. Drawing on both accounts from Aboriginal people and personal observations, Howitt wrote detailed reports of mystical practices to heal the sick or curse foes – including one with striking similarity to the evidence unearthed in the cave. To bring harm upon an enemy, a sorcerer obtained an object associated with an intended victim such as a piece of clothing, hair, or food scrap, and affixed it to the end of a stick smeared with human or kangaroo fat. The *mulla-mullung* then planted the stick into the ground beside a small fire and sung the name of the intended victim until the implement fell into the flames – thereby casting a spell of doom. Other ethnographic texts associated *Casuarina* sticks with sorcery as well. "It was all about waiting for the results of analysis of the stick and going back to the ethnographic written evidence – and it all matched," recalls Russell Mullett, who oversees all cultural research on GunaiKurnai lands. "Everything aligned with the activities of a *mulla-mullun* – a doctor."

The convergence of archæological evidence and ethnographic accounts demonstrates just how long Aboriginal traditions have survived, says Bruno David, an archæologist at Monash and lead author of the new paper. "That's 12,000 years of continuity, passing down knowledge from one generation to the next, of a cultural practice that has remained almost intact along 500 generations," he says. "That's absolutely remarkable." *science.org, 2 July 2024*.

EARLY COCA CONSUMPTION

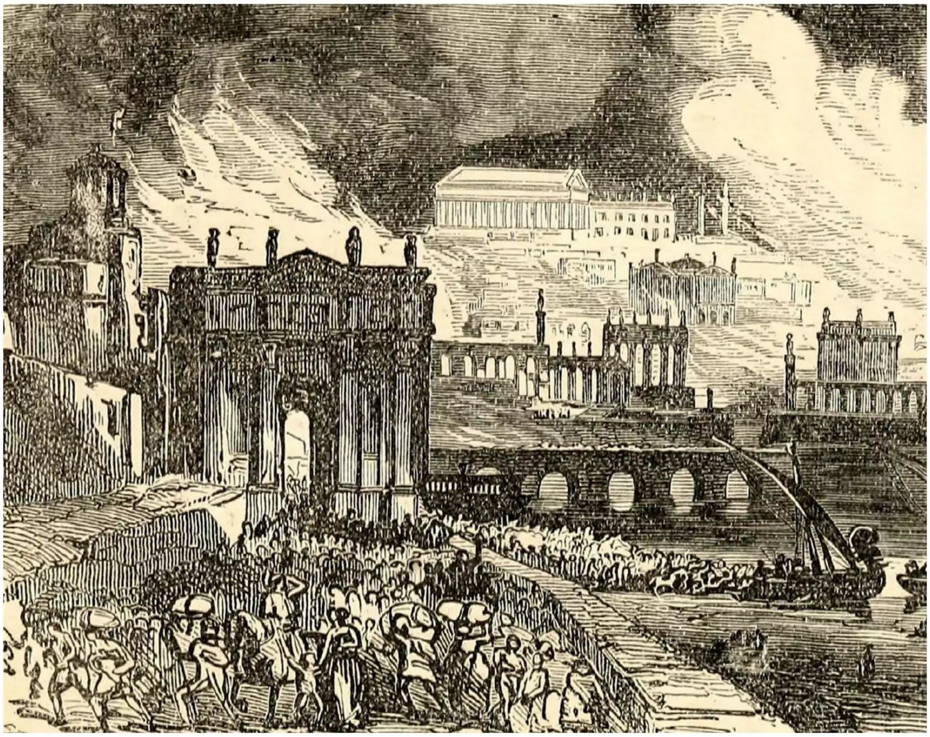
A team of biomedical and medicinal specialists from the University of Milan has found evidence of coca chewing by at least two people as far back as the 17th century in Europe. In the study, published in the *Journal of Archæological Science*, the group analysed the preserved brains of two people found in a crypt in Milan used as a burial site for people who died in the nearby Ospedale Maggiore. Prior research had found that for thousands of years, people living in western parts of South America chewed on the leaves of the coca plant to experience its chemical effects. After it was found that the leaves could be processed to make cocaine hydrochloride salts in the 19th century, the mind-altering effects of the drug became more widely known and it became a popular recreational drug in many parts of Europe.

The team studied the remains of people entombed in the Ca' Granda crypt in Milan, which was used as a burial site for most of the 17th century. As part of their work, they discovered the remains of two people who had been mummified. Both had active components of the coca plant in their brains, which meant they had been chewing leaves known as *Erythroxylum coca*. The research team also studied the pharmacological records of the Ospedale Maggiore and found no records of cocaine or coca plants being used for medicinal purposes, suggesting that the two people had been chewing the leaves for other reasons. The team noted that the two mummified individuals were buried in a place and in such a way as to suggest that they were poor, further suggesting that the coca leaves were cheap and likely plentiful and that they were chewed recreationally. *phys.org. 23 Aug 2024*.

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

309: HOT SPOTS



LEFT: The Great Fire of Rome, AD 64, from *The History of Nero*, 1881.

The Los Angeles fires (**FT455:23**), plus the many global conflagrations in recent years, sometimes make one feel the entire planet is burning. Since Antiquity is the business of these columns, I single out the contemporary combustions that have afflicted Greece and Italy.

Early Christians must have felt this way, given God's threat to destroy the world by fire; 2 Peter 3.10. Likewise Jews, in light of the almost 100 Old Testament references (e.g. Numbers 11.11) to divinely-inspired fiery destructions, most famously of course being that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Their modern counterparts are the ineffable Televangelists and other hell-fire preachers (worst being the Kansas-based Westboro Baptist Church, once characterised by Barack Obama as the most hateful group in America) who blame all natural disasters on God's wrath at toleration of homosexuality.

Back in the world of reason, Climate Change ("A hoax" – Donald Trump) is most frequently invoked. I have no quarrel with that, albeit footnoting that Earth has gone through many such over our planet's existence long before the Industrial Revolution and its consequences.

Another wretched factor is arson. In recent days (January 2025), Los Angeles authorities have announced the arrests of several people accused of this unspeakable crime. Given the deaths of fire victims, I see no reason why these creatures should not be tried for murder and suffer the consequences.

The most infamous arsonist in Greek history was Herostratus, who burned down the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, one of the Seven Wonders of the World (a single pillar remains), in order to win eternal fame. Supposedly, he did this on 25 July 356 BC, the day Alexander the Great was born.

Herostratus was tortured and executed, and in order to thwart his desire, punishment was decreed for anyone who mentioned his name. Since we know all about it, this ban was clearly ineffective.

Alexander may be classified as an arsonist for burning down the city of Persepolis, drunkenly obeying the whim of the harlot Thais: Plutarch's biography, ch38.

A respectable excuse was cobbled up: this act was revenge for the Persian burning of Athens in 480.

The ultimate ancient arsonist is popularly thought to be Nero for kindling the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64. However, as shall be seen below, this may well be an early example of 'Fake News'.

A brief preamble of some simple facts not always remembered. Ancient cities had no electrical wires falling down on buildings or people to cause fires. There was no natural gas or petroleum to produce explosions. Stone and marble buildings crumble slowly when exposed to the high heat of things stored within, allowing some time to extinguish flames.

As remarked by Lucas Thommen in his *An Environmental History of Ancient Greece* (2012), there are very few descriptions of wild fires in Greek literature. One rare such is given by Thucydides (bk4 ch30 para2), in which he describes how a soldier cooking dinner caused a huge fiery outburst on the island of Sphakteria (426 BC).

The best evidence for Greek awareness of this ever-present threat is provided by two similes in Homer's *Iliad* (bk14 vv394-401, bk20 vv490-4). The mere fact that these are similes points to widespread awareness.

This is the first one:

"Not so loudly bellows the wave of the sea upon the shore, driven up by the dread blast of the North Wind, nor so loud is the roar of blazing fire in the glades of a mountain when it leaps up to burn the forest, nor does the wind shriek so loud amid the high crests of the oaks – the wind that roars the loudest in its rage…"

These lines are eerily appropriate to the Santa Ana Winds that spread the flames in Pacific Palisades.

According to the very useful inventory of fires in Rome by HV Canter, *Classical Journal* 27 (1932), 270-288 (online), there were at least 15 major fires during the Republican period. Not just the capital. A prime source for this period and topic is *The Book of Prodigies* by the late compiler Julius Obsequens, consisting of extrapolations from Livy. His notices of annual events include "fires in many places which burnt the clothes of several people" and, most strikingly, a conflagration at the

Italian town of Rhenium which occurred “without criminality or carelessness”. This obviously implies that arson and human error were frequent causes.

Obsequens’s book is, incidentally, the most ‘fortean’ of all ancient collections of prodigies. Every annual notice is crammed with strange events, some of which would make even Fort’s head reel. Happily, there is an online translation by Alex Nice.

A notable feature of Obsequens’s annals is the enormous incidence of fires caused by lightning strikes. It hardly needs saying that these remain a prime cause of wild fires, thereby perhaps adding a caveat to suspicions of global warning as the go-to explanation.

There are three major sources, none contemporary, for the Great Fire under Nero which broke out on 18 July AD 64: Tacitus, *Annals*, bk15 chs38-40; Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, ch38; Dio Cassius, bk62 chs16-8. Also an inscription (*CIL* 6. 826) which says it lasted nine days. It began in some shops near the Circus containing combustibles and spread quickly and widely, incinerating 10 of the city’s 14 regions. Although brought under partial control, a second blaze occurred on the estates of Tigellinus, Nero’s prætorian prefect.

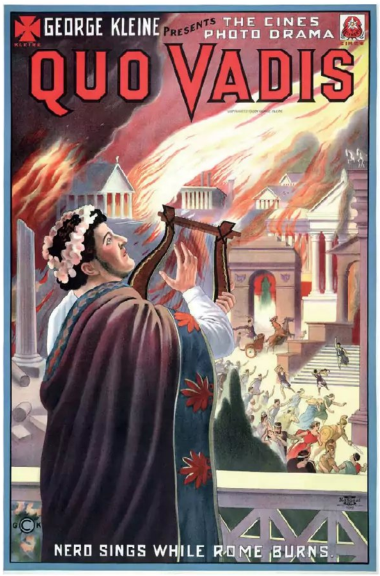
Everybody thinks they know that Nero ‘fiddled while Rome burned’ – there was no such instrument in his day. Dio and Suetonius flatly claim that Nero ordered arson in order to create a suitable background for him to intone his poem on the Burning of Troy. Tacitus is more circumspect, saying that it was uncertain whether it was arson or accident, there being both versions then circulating; the singing story he calls a ‘rumour’

Tacitus is by far the most reliable of sources. He was clearly uneasy about discrepant accounts. In the manner of Herodotus, he presents both sides and leaves it up to the reader.

He had no sympathy with the Christians and the ghastly punishments wrought upon them: thrown to wild animals, crucified, burned alive: probably too extreme for the Los Angeles miscreants.

Was Nero as unbalanced as Peter Ustinov in *Quo Vadis*? How can we know? Suetonius does not dub him ‘mad’ as he did with Caligula. My instinct is that he was capable of the arson, but…? It should be added that his rebuilding plans were eminently sensible, nor does he seem to have followed through with his notion of renaming Rome ‘Neropolis’ – shades of Trump and the Gulf of Mexico.

Nero was down at Antium when the fire began. That proves nothing. More to the point is the huge numbers of fires suffered by Rome. Canter lists nine for the reign of Augustus, five under Tiberius, and a major one in Claudius’s time. A decade or so after Nero there was a huge conflagration under Titus (AD 79-81). He was universally regarded as ‘the Darling of All Mankind’: unthinkable that anyone would accuse him of incendiarism.



LEFT: The poster for the 1913 Italian film of *Quo Vadis* has Nero singing and playing a lyre (not a fiddle) while Rome burns. **BELOW**: Peter Ustinov’s splendidly unbalanced Nero in the 1951 *Quo Vadis*.

They claim that Nero ordered arson to create a background for him to intone his poem on the Burning of Troy

In his *Third Satire* (vv190-230), cataloguing the horrors of metropolitan life, Juvenal includes the endless fires in Rome’s apartment blocks (nicknamed ‘Insulæ’ = Islands). Since a Roman inventory of city buildings says there were over 40,000 of these, it is easy to see the huge potential for devastations.

And, again, not just at Rome. Not long after the Neronian blaze, Seneca (*Letters to Lucilius*, no.90) reports the total destruction of Lugdunum (Lyon). This was especially poignant: its citizens had sent four million sesterces to Rome as fire-relief for victims.

In *Maia* 28 (1976), 35-6, I spotted a possible contemporary allusion to the Fire in Petronius’s novel *Satyricon* ch53 para6. The host Trimalchio has his business accounts for 26 July read aloud. They include a fire on one of his suburban estates in buildings owned by one of his stewards. July is the right month. Some commentators continue to see Trimalchio as representing Nero. As seen, the second Roman fire started in properties of Tigellinus. Given his position, it is not too far-fetched to see him as the emperor’s steward.

A last word on the Christians. Tacitus says numbers of them were caught kindling fires, confessing (under torture, of course) to this. In his *Nero: The Man and the Legend* (1964), John Bishop (colleague of mine in Australia) argued that some Christians saw the fire as God’s Work, therefore deemed it their duty to help it on. Bishop’s theory seems largely disregarded, but it strikes me as plausible.

I had intended to go into Byzantine fires at some length, but exigencies of space and sensing an impatient editor, I confine myself to directing readers to an online detailed inventory of these by Birsel Küçuksipahioglu, from AD 388 to 1453, some natural wild fires, some arson, above all the great ‘Nika Revolt” of 532, the work of rioting sports fans – even EPL yobs have never gone so far…

It is striking how quickly ancient cities recovered from these disasters. Only a decade or so after Nero, Roman emperors were building the Colosseum. Of course, they arguably had less to recover from. But it might give some encouragement to fire-ravaged Angelenos…

Ghost attacks and crawling bugs

DAVID HAMBLING looks at the sometimes scary world of hypnagogic and hypnopompic states

"It was all a dream," is as unsatisfying when explaining strange events as it is in twist endings in fiction. But research into the borderlands between sleep and wakefulness shows that the boundary is less distinct than we assume. This can cause a variety of weird and sometimes terrifying experiences.

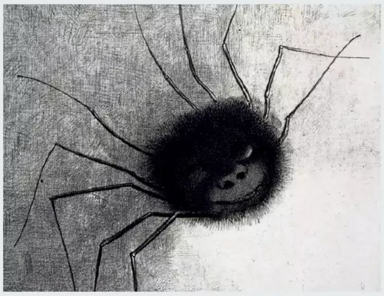
Hypnagogic and hypnopompic states exist between waking and sleeping, the difference being that hypnagogic (term coined 1848) refers to those experienced while falling asleep and hypnopompic (1904) while recovering consciousness. They have attracted little study. The first major review of hypnagogic states was only published in 1976. A more recent review in 2022 from the University of Bern updates the earlier findings. The authors describe hypnagogic states as "spontaneously appearing visual, auditory and kinæsthetic images" which occur while the subject is conscious, contrasting with the unconscious dream state.

Earlier researchers talked about hypnagogic hallucinations, the Bern review prefers to call them 'states' because 'hallucinations' are associated with pathology. Unlike true hallucinations, the experiencers are generally aware that what they are experiencing is not real. "At best, hypnagogic states could be classified as pseudo-hallucinations," say the authors. To them, these states only become hallucinations when they cause distress. Hallucination is in the eye of the beholder.

It is difficult to say how common such experiences are, as different studies have reported wildly different figures, from under 10% right up to 85% of participants. A 1996 survey of some 5,000 people found 37% experiencing hypnagogic states at least twice a week in the previous 12 months.

The 1976 review suggested most hypnagogic states were visual, common images being people, animals or simple patterns. But the 2022 review found that kinæsthetic experiences, such as a presence in the room or sensations of floating or falling were most common, along with visual experiences, followed by auditory experiences.

Compared to dreams, hypnagogic states involve less interaction and less emotional content, being 'emotionally flat'. Auditory experiences are typically voices in another room, doorbells or alarms. These may be irritating but not distressing. There are notable exceptions though. A 2019 study of Cambodian refugees found that they interpreted their hypnagogic experiences as 'ghost attacks'. The refugees often reported seeing a human-shaped shadow at the foot of the bed, feeling an evil presence in the room, and hearing someone calling out to them. Individuals who suffered from PTSD (which may have been related to the death of a family member) reported a higher rate of ghost attacks. This suggests that cultural factors are at work. Something which would be dismissed as 'just a bad dream' by one culture may be interpreted as a supernatural encounter in another.



Another CNVH patient saw spiders climbing from the floor to the walls and the ceiling

Explosive head syndrome or EHS is a very different but also distressing auditory hypnagogic experience, marked by a loud explosive noise while dropping off or emerging from sleep. Unsurprisingly, it triggers full wakefulness. Though usually infrequent, EHS can cause fear and distress. It may also become chronic.

More recently researchers have classified another type of hallucinatory state alongside hypnagogic and hypnopompic experiences, known as complex nocturnal visual hallucinations or CNVH. These are hallucinations that persist after the experiencer has woken up, but usually dissipate when lighting is increased. Most patients understand the hallucinations are not real, but they can provoke anxiety and distress.

A study looking at three cases included a woman who regularly woke after two or three hours of sleep to see people in her room, bugs in her bed, or tarantulas on the ceiling. In the early days she would scream and bolt out of bed fully awake, occasionally injuring herself, but she reported that she later "got used to them". The hallucinations persisted for seconds to minutes, but vanished when she turned on the light. Another CNVH patient saw spiders climbing from the floor to the walls and ceiling. Sometimes they were in her bed, and sometimes she felt the tactile sensations of spider contact. A third saw spiders and bugs moving on the floor and in her bed. In both cases the hallucinations lasted for up to a minute and caused experiencers to leap out of bed. Interestingly, in all three cases the CNVH disappeared when the patients were treated with melatonin. Other CNVH experiencers report hooded figures or other presences.

At least these experiences are confined to times near waking and sleeping, which helps identify them. But in 2004 another state of consciousness emerged, dubbed daytime parahypnagogia (DPH). DPH resembles daydreaming and is described as "trance-like, dreamlike, uncanny", but is not directed by the experiencer. Like daydreaming, it is more common when a person is tired, bored, or doing a repetitive task.

Studying these experiences is difficult because cases are so rare, and because they may resemble other conditions. And again, there are cultural factors. One person's involuntary daydream may be another's faerie encounter, and not something they would take to a psychologist. People are often insistent that they know they were not dreaming, whereas cases of CNVH show that 'dreams' can intrude more into waking life than you might expect.

Similarly, people may be unwilling to admit to seeing things because they think it makes them sound mad. This stigma is exactly why the Bern report refers to hypnagogic states rather than hallucinations.

Clearly there is some overlap with fortean experiences, especially where the experiencer reports a dream-like or uncanny feeling during an encounter with the strange. For example, reports of alien abductions while someone is in bed may closely resemble hypnagogic experiences of floating, other beings in the room and so on. Such experiences may be combined with sleep paralysis, which again may be interpreted as strange and unnatural. Further research into sleep-related experiences may help us understand this field better. But "It was all a dream/hypnagogic experience/CNVH/DPH" will never be a very satisfying explanation, especially to those who want to believe.

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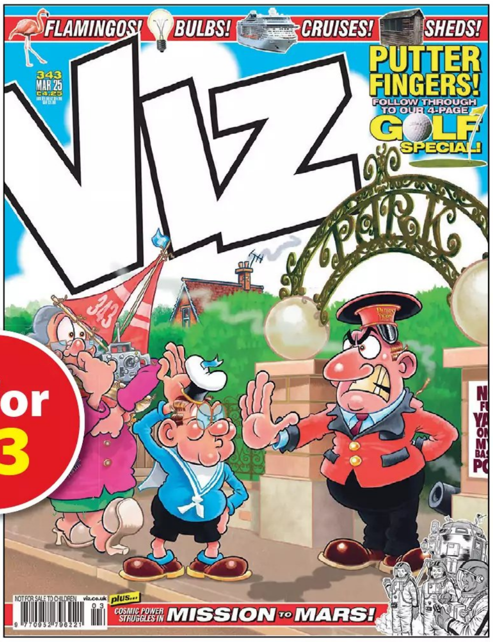
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A nation in low spirits

ALAN MURDIE fears the decline of the pub will be a disaster for ghost hunters as well as drinkers

NEIL HOWARD / FLICKR / CREATIVE COMMONS

TIM WHITTARD / SWNS

ABOVE LEFT: Jamaica Inn in Cornwall, a place to be seen "on a midwinter day when the wind is howling across the grey, deserted landscape". **ABOVE RIGHT**: The inn has recently been subject to a number of incidents captured on CCTV, such as this phone seemingly leaping from its cradle and being left dangling.

It is a grim time for pubs, haunted ones included. Since pubs and inns are one of our most consistently types of haunted buildings in the UK, their steady decline is a cause of concern to more than the drinking classes.

As I write, the Abbot's Fireside in Elham, near Canterbury, originally built as the Smithies' Arms in 1451, and which boasted a rich history of royal and military connections, has announced closure. Now I don't know if the Abbot's Fireside is haunted, but it ought to be. Local tradition holds King Charles II once hid there from Roundhead forces, secreting himself in a hole within the main fireplace (*Metro*, 14 Feb 2025 and many others).

If this can happen to a pub in the heart of hop-growing country, it can happen anywhere. Given reports from some areas, it may be no great exaggeration by Colin Simmonds, editor of Northamptonshire Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) newsletter *Over The Barrel* (Feb 2025), to describe pub and brewery closures as an "eradication programme".

Of course, taking the long view, the great majority of British pubs through history have gone west. Across the centuries, there are countless lost pubs, inns, taverns and ale houses now known only as names and indifferent entries in the historical record. What we are witnessing is an accelerating diminution of readily accessible places of spectral interest and, since starting this column, a number of reputedly haunted pubs featured here or in haunted pub guides have sadly disappeared (e.g. the Low Valley Arms in Barnsley, South Yorkshire).

> An empty glass appears to explode as he approaches, making him jump and shout "It wasn't me!"

That this should be occurring just at the point ubiquitous CCTV cameras are increasingly picking up alleged ghostly events on film is a further cause of regret.

Early in 2025 came reports of a "freaked out" landlady at the New Wellington pub in Newmarket, Suffolk. CCTV footage from Friday 18 January shows a glass smashing of its own accord after Georgina Sampson waved off the last two customers and her father, Nigel Sampson, 63, went to tidy up their table. An empty pint glass appears to explode as he approaches, making him jump and immediately shout "It wasn't me!" to his daughter. Georgina, 35, didn't believe him, but upon checking the film it confirmed that he had not touched the glass. They jointly conclude it is the pub's resident ghost, as the table on which this happened is known as the 'haunted table' because salt and pepper pots tumble off it without explanation.

It adds to a number of incidents over the last three years at this relatively modern pub (built 1932) recorded by Georgina. In 2022 she released film to TikTok of two customers caught off-guard when a pint exploded in front of them; the video racked up over 113,000 views. Georgina has direct experience herself as on one occasion a glass broke neatly in half in her hand as she was pouring a drink. She adds: "We do joke about there being a ghost in the pub when lights have come on that we've turned off, or doors have been pinned open when we've shut them."

No traditional story attaches to the Wellington and so far, no one has connected it with tales of ghostly Fred Archer galloping on the nearby heath (see **FT451:16-18**). Nor is any tragic or violent incident recorded in the history of the building. (*D.Mirror*, 31 Jan 2025; *Suffolk News*, 2 July 2022).

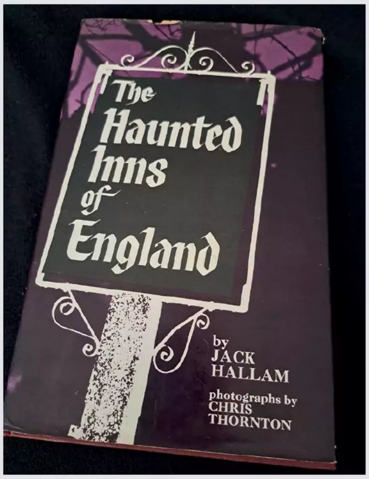
In certain cases, carefully logging such incidents may reveal a connection to the presence of a particular person or at a

TIM WHITTARD / SWNS

ABOVE: The presenter of *Weird Britain*, Andy McGrath, meets Jamaica Inn’s manager, Katy Marriott, to discuss the pub’s resident ‘poltergeist’, which has apparently been knocking over drinks. **BELOW**: Jack Hallam’s 1972 book *The Haunted Inns of England* recounted Jamaica Inn’s history of ghosts.

particular time of day. In other cases, the phenomenon appears attached to the place, as with the premier haunted pub of the West Country, the celebrated Jamaica Inn in Cornwall. Situated between Bodmin and Launceston, Jamaica Inn is a place to be seen “on a midwinter day when the wind is howling across the grey deserted landscape, hurling the persistent drizzle at the granite walls with demented fury,” to quote ghost hunter Jack Hallam in his *The Haunted Inns of England* (1972). Long enjoying worldwide fame thanks to the eponymous Daphne du Maurier novel (1936) and its 1939 film adaptation by Alfred Hitchcock, it has recently featured in film clips of a different kind from CCTV allegedly showing strange object movements. One incident mentioned in the *Metro* and the *Daily Mirror* for 9 April 2024 shows a drink in a glass at the pub being spilt all over the floor.

Not an unusual event at any pub you might think, but staff and regulars ascribe this to a resident poltergeist nicknamed ‘Jack’, reputedly “a sailor murdered on a nearby moorland” over 100 years ago. ‘Jack’ is blamed for upset pints and smashed glasses: “It’s his idea of fun, of a jest,” according to manager Katy Marriott. “I have definitely experienced things here that I cannot explain”, she adds. “Staff are so used to things like this.”



Another clip released from Jamaica Inn shows a barmaid named April carrying out cleaning around 10.30pm one Sunday night. In the video she hears what she thought was a bar door opening, but no one enters; a related clip shows that what has purportedly happened is a wall-mounted telephone has sprung from its cradle and is left dangling.

Andy McGrath, the host of the TV show *Weird Britain*, whimsically opined: “For all we know, these spirits are watching us every day; they’ve picked up on the technology and Jack’s saying ‘April, I just called to say I love you!’”

These events would have not surprised April’s predecessors. In 1998 Rose Marie Mullins published *The Inn on the Moor: A History of Jamaica Inn*, citing testimonies from staff and long-time regulars, including how the family of a landlord named Palmer who took the pub after World War II often heard unexplained footsteps echoing through the building. Other haunted pub books contain similar stories and mention occasional apparitions e.g. *The Haunted Pub Guide* (1984) by Guy Playfair.

These suggestive film clips typify a widespread phenomenon: the elusive and invisible stalker that seems to visit so many pubs from Land’s End to John O’Groats. On the whole, pub poltergeists cause less uproar than outbreaks in family homes, mostly confining themselves to sounds like footsteps, opening doors, moving small objects and pulling off bedclothes in bedrooms. Often they move or upset glasses and mugs (prior to the 2008 smoking ban, they shifted ashtrays), but generally do not displace larger objects and furniture (though occasionally there are exceptions such as the dubious stories concerning the St Anne’s Castle Inn at Great Leighs, Essex (see Robert Halliday, "The Witch of Scrapfaggot Green", **FT303:30-35**). More alarming and harassing touches by invisible hands also feature in accounts.

Quite frequently a casual visit and discreet enquiry with staff at a pub will reveal a history of relatively minor ghostly incidents, the vast majority of which go otherwise unreported. Ghost hunter Andrew Green (1927-2004) seemingly enjoyed considerable success with this approach in gathering accounts, and it still works.

Thinking of this, on 24 July 2024 on an overcast and muggy afternoon in Kirkcaldy in Fife, I visited the Feuars Arms situated along the encouragingly named 'Bogie's Wynd'. This hostelry is briefly mentioned in *The Haunted Places of Scotland* (2009) by Martin Coventry as having been visited by a ghost hunting group in 2005. Over a couple of pints of McEwans ale I listened to the experiences of a pleasant barmaid named Shawby who whilst she knew nothing of events in 2005 could tell me of current manifestations, including hearing for herself the heavy tread of footsteps crossing the impressive mosaic and art nouveau decorated bar. Every time, upon going to investigate, she has found the bar completely empty. On Hallowe'en evening 2023 she encountered what she described as an intense feeling of a presence in the cellar, one so powerful she fled, fearing that something was following her up the steps into the bar. Possibly the impression may have been sharpened by the associations of the night.

So just who are these shades that are carrying-on so in British pubs?

A difficult question to ever answer, since few pub ghosts are ever given more than a tentative identification. Sporting ghost hunter James Wentworth Day (1899-1983) considered: "An old family place is steeped in the personalities of one family or of only a few. The pub has welcomed them all." (*A Garland of Hops* (1982)). If so, the ghost could be anyone from any time – any type of customer, from the Saturday night singer, the roaring sports fanatic or the silent man at a corner table wholly absorbed in his newspaper crossword.

Could disturbances be the echo of the convulsed drunk screeching at anyone who'll listen – and even those who won't? Or perhaps the alcoholic who always in life failed to catch his train or bus by staying for one more drink and who has never left? The uppity and pompous customers loudly complaining about their meals, measures, or the wrong change? Disappointed souls who once haplessly planted themselves in the lounge seeking a romantic liaison or hoping to rekindle a past passion?

THE BRIDGE TEA ROOMS

ABOVE: Might such establishments as the Bridge Tea Rooms in Bradford-upon-Avon take over from haunted pubs in the future?

THE BRIDGE TEA ROOMS

Or perhaps they are returning souls celebrating still some wonderful occasion, or maybe spirits summoned back by commemorations at a long-past wake. Conceivably, even a luckless ghost hunter, returning to a site fruitlessly explored in life? There simply is no way of telling. We may note that the ghost, often known only by a first name or nickname, is frequently just a character in a wholly unverifiable bit of gossip or a local legend.

Ultimately, we cannot determine whether pub manifestations derive from revenants fixed to a place or exemplify what in Spiritualist circles are termed 'drop-in communicators' – unexpected entities which pop up without invitation. Alternatively, manifestations might represent nothing even human at all or are just an echo or expression of some unknown force. Such problems with identification afflict hauntings in many domestic cases (and a pub is after all a 'public house'). As Barrie Roberts in *Midland Ghosts and Hauntings* (1994) put it: "…if you are playing host to some misunderstood natural force rather than your deceased relative, why should the manifestations be explicable?" (cited in *Haunted Holidays* (2002) by Anne Bradford and David Taylor).

But it's not just licensed premises claiming ghostly effects. If you're a teetotaller or part of the generation who don't include imbibing alcohol among their regular habits and pastimes, there are also numerous haunted tea-rooms and cafés, some reporting similar events, such as the Village Green Tea Room at Rivington, Lancashire, where co-owner Jade Tolen posted CCTV footage showing a glass milk jug falling from a shelf, an incident attributed to an amiable phantom. ("Rivington's Village Green Tea Room 'haunted' by friendly ghost', *Bolton News*, 4 Jan 2024).

The briefest of searches soon turns up plenty of potential instances for examination, including the Tudor Rose Tea Room, Plymouth (*Plymouth Live*, 24 Aug 2024), the Bridge Tea Rooms, Bradford-upon-Avon (*Wiltshire Live*, 21 Feb 2023). Examples are discoverable over the years, including the now-closed Rainbow Café and the still open nearby Indigo Coffee House in Cambridge (see *Cambridge Ghosts* (2010) by Robert Halliday and Alan Murdie) and traceable all the way back to the St Margaret's Street Café, Ipswich, in 1950 (*Two Worlds*, 2 Dec 1950). Maybe while focusing on haunted pubs, ghost hunters are missing a parallel pattern of manifestations afflicting tea shops. My impression – from admittedly very limited examination – suggests tea-shop hauntings are (rather appropriately) less raucous and gentler than those in pubs.

If so, it raises the vital question, are manifestations shaped in some way by buildings, their clientele and usage? Pub hauntings are one thing, but the prospect of visitations from beyond interfering with a hallowed British institution like afternoon tea is surely a matter meriting urgent attention.

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

Conspiracy theories don't go away when faced with facts, says **NOEL ROONEY**, and some grow ever stranger in the face of the latest scoops and leaks...

WHO KILLED SETH RICH?

The unfortunate – or mysterious – death of Seth Rich (**FT371:37, 421:24**), in July 2016, sparked competing rumour mills and conspiracy theories across the US political spectrum. Rich was murdered (or assassinated, or bumped off by TPTB) on a quiet Washington street after apparently staying in a local bar until two in the morning. His half-hour walk home appears to have taken longer than usual; the attack occurred around 4am, and Rich died shortly afterwards.

Rich, 27 at the time of his death, worked for the DNC (the Democratic National Committee). His job – voter expansion data director – makes it clear that IT was central; this may explain why he was promptly linked to the leak of emails from the DNC server that eventually gave rise to the Russiagate flap. The leak occurred in early July; that is to say, only a few weeks before Rich's untimely demise.

However, there are some indications that the Seth Rich story may have begun much earlier. He allegedly contacted KimDotCom in 2014, with information about corruption and the undue influence of corporate money; he used the pseudonym Panda, presumably to protect his real identity. In 2015, a sub-Reddit appeared called Pandas for Bernie, and several observers have linked this to the Kim episode. Around the same time, John Podesta, then head honcho at DNC, sent an email stating that leakers would be "made an example of"; at this point, there were no hints of problems with DNC servers or leaked information.

In early 2016, Rich began posting on Reddit under a new handle: MeGrimlock4. Grimlock is a character from Transformers who only speaks in the third person; some found this detail significant. Then, in April-May 2016, rumours began to circulate that a major leak had been discovered at DNC. By June of that year, the media – and DNC insiders – began to mutter darkly about Russian involvement in the leaks.

Despite the total lack of evidence, Russiagate refused to die

The DNC commissioned an investigation to determine if someone (that someone now being, very firmly, Russia) had hacked the server. The report concluded that the servers had not been hacked, by Vlad the Invader or anyone else. This was not news the DNC or the media wanted to hear so they ignored it and sent Russiagate into overdrive. At much the same time, a Romanian hacker called Guccifer 2.0 claimed he had hacked the servers, acting alone. To summarise: the servers had not been hacked, but the media was still saying Russia did it and various other parties were claiming responsibility for an event that had not happened.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump, who had become the main target of Russiagate, denied any involvement with Russia. Julian Assange, founder of Wikileaks (where the leaked emails had surfaced) also denied Russian involvement. The Democrats and the media ploughed on regardless, expanding their attack on Trump with a series of evidence-free allegations, including the famous Russiagate dossier (the Donald peeing on Obama's hotel bed, among other tasty – or merely tasteless – morsels).

Despite the total lack of evidence, Russiagate refused to die; it is still alluded to regularly whenever the subject of Trump comes up in US media. Investigative journalists have shown fairly conclusively that the whole affair was, in effect, a conspiracy theory; but as we know, conspiracy theories do not go away just because the facts are apparently against them. Since 2016, the taint of Russian collusion has never left Trump and some Democrats, perhaps most notably Hillary Clinton, have never let it drop. If you give it a few seconds' thought, however, it was at this point irrelevant if Trump was best mates with Vlad or not.

And so the sorry saga has rumbled along, sometimes in the margins, sometimes in the headlines, for close to 10 years. Meanwhile, the murder of Seth Rich has never been satisfactorily explained; nor has the fate of the laptop he was carrying at the time of his death been revealed. Until another investigative journalist, a luminary of the genre, weighed in.

Seymour Hersh has a special place in the US media. He famously exposed the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War, and US government attempts to cover it up; since then he has been a cultural hero to many in the media. On the other hand, his longstanding connection to the *New York Times*, and his links to three-letter agencies, has led some to believe he is now a government mouthpiece. So when a story broke that Hersh had a scoop on the Seth Rich mystery, plenty of people were prepared to listen.

The 'scoop' is itself a leak; a recording of a telephone conversation (only Hersh's side of it) during which he makes a number of claims about Rich. Rich contacted Wikileaks with some "juicy emails" and asked for money; he left copies of the leaked material with friends in case something happened to him; the FBI has decoded his laptop and found evidence of his activity. Perhaps oddest of all, he claims that Rich's murder was indeed a botched robbery.

If this is the truth about Seth Rich, then his story is stranger than either side claims. He was the person at the centre of the leaked emails, but his death was a morbid coincidence. He was acting out of self-interest rather than moral principle. He was, in fact, a villain in the piece; and his death was an oblique form of poetic justice.

Or perhaps Hersh is performing a standard limited hangout on someone's behalf. Casting Rich as the baddie is a gambit designed to protect the real guilty party. Either way, the Seth Rich story is clearly far from resolved. For now, it resides in conspiratorial Limbo, at least until the next revelation rearranges the puzzle pieces.

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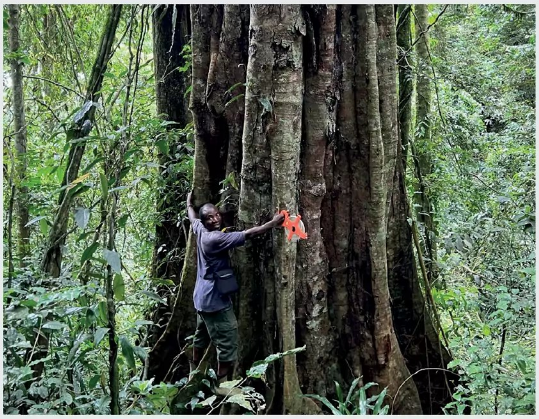
ALIEN ZOO NEWS FROM THE CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL GARDEN

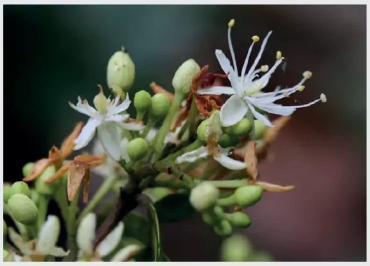
KARL SHUKER reports on a very large new species and a set of unusually fortean stamps

A TREE-MENDOUS TANZANIAN DISCOVERY

As a cryptozoologist rather than a cryptobotanist (or cryptophytologist, an alternative term for mystery plant seekers coined several decades ago by Bernard Heuvelmans, but which never seemed to catch on), I don't often document newly-discovered plant species, unless they are truly spectacular – which this example certainly is, so here is its story. The rainforests of eastern Tanzania's Udzungwa Mountains are home to many rare, endemic species, some of which have remained unknown to science until recent years. Having said that, none of them are anywhere near as visible as the species reported here, on account of its enormous size, which would make its exceedingly belated scientific discovery difficult to understand, were it not for how inaccessible and therefore little-visited these mountains are. In 2019, however, a visiting team of scientists from Kenya's National Museum and from Muse-Museo delle Scienze, Udzungwa Corridor LTD, Via Grazia Deledda, while hiking in the Uluti Village and the Boma la Mzinga Forest Reserves, encountered a very large yet wholly unfamiliar tree, sporting small but distinctive flowers whose thin white petals bore tiny yellow bulbs at their tips. Moreover, the tree's lofty apex was pushing through the forest canopy, 40m (130ft) above ground-level, and its trunk's girth was massive. So they took some photographs of it and collected some leaf samples for laboratory analysis, which confirmed that the tree represented a species hitherto unknown to science, and which in March 2025 was formally christened *Tessmannia princeps* in a *Phytotaxa* paper.

Recently, some of the team's members returned to the site where they had encountered this remarkable tree, and following a detailed search of the area they discovered approximately 100 individuals of this new species, including one that had fallen to the ground through natural causes, and which therefore enabled them to obtain wood samples. Analysis of them revealed that these extraordinary trees are extremely slow-growing, taking up to 15 years to add as little as 1cm (0.39in) to their girth. Furthermore, some of them may be up to 3,000 years old. Happily, however, as their mountain home is a designated national park, their future seems secure in spite of their low numbers, and their existence constitutes solid – very solid! – proof that it is by no means impossible even for stationary terrestrial species up to 40m tall to evade scientific attention, which must surely give cryptozoologists hope that at least some of their much smaller, highly mobile terrestrial quarries – let alone their aquatic ones – may indeed exist. *https://news.mongabay.com/2025/03/3000-year-old-trees-in-tanzania-are-new-species/*



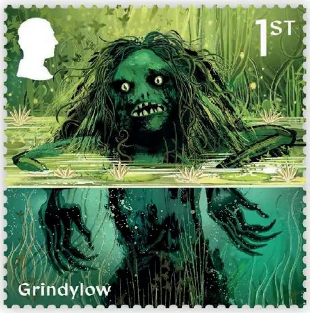


ANDREABIANCHI / PHYTOTAXA

LEFT: The bole of a very large *Tessmannia princeps*. **BELOW LEFT**: The tree's distinctive flowers.

MYTHICAL BEASTS STAMPED ON

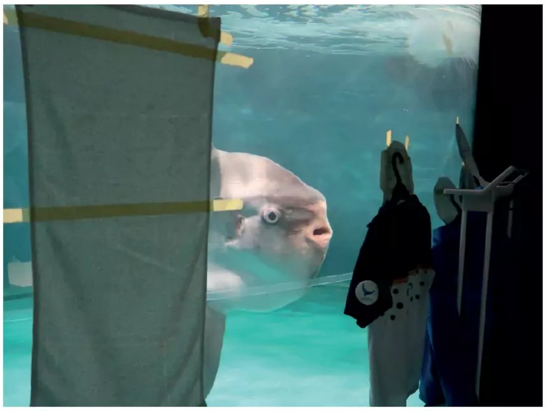
On 27 March 2025, the UK's Royal Mail officially released a new set of commemorative UK postage stamps, entitled "Myths and Legends", which will certainly be of especial interest to FT readers. This is because the subjects illustrated on its eight stamps (all of first class denomination) are mythological creatures and supernatural figures from UK folklore. The full octet so portrayed are: the Loch Ness Monster, Grendel (depicted battling Beowulf), Cornish piskies, Black Shuck (East Anglia's famous spectral Black Dog), selkies (the shape-shifting seal folk of Orkney and Shetland), a grindylow, the human giant Fionn mac Cumhaill from Northern Ireland (who reputedly constructed the Giant's Causeway), and Blodeuwedd. As you'll realise if your knowledge of local British geography stretches to regional legendary entities, each of the latter examples hails from a different region of Britain – so as to demonstrate "our rich mythological heritage", in the words of London-based artist Adam Simpson who designed the stamps. Although I pride myself on being tolerably knowledgeable on such matters, I freely confess, however, that two of these eight examples selected and depicted by Simpson were entirely new to me – namely, the Grindylow and Blodeuwedd. Consequently, I was particularly pleased to see them in this set as their presence inspired me to research what – or who – they are. It turns out that Grindylows, hailing from the folklore of Lancashire and Yorkshire, are malign humanoid freshwater beings with long arms that conceal themselves in deep pools and rivers, waiting to snatch and drown inquisitive children who do not heed their parents' warnings to keep away from these dangerous aquatic domains (thus functioning rather like the more familiar kappas of Japanese mythology, i.e. as bogeymen to frighten children away from such localities). And Blodeuwedd is the legendary Welsh hero Lleu Llaw Gyffes's wife, who was created magically for him from flowers ('Blodeuwedd' translates as 'flower face'). The images on these eight stamps are extremely attractive, veritable works of art in miniature, and will make very handsome additions to the collection of any philatelist, or to that of anyone interested in UK folklore. For more, see p.5. *www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0eg2evrq55o*



ROYAL MAIL

CREATURE FEATURES

A "massive monkey thing" on the loose in Cambridge, a lonely sunfish in Japan and some very eager beavers



KAIKYOKAN AQUARIUM

BRDY PROTECTED LAND ADMINISTRATION

ABOVE LEFT: Kaikyokan Aquarium's lonely sun fish finds new friends of the cardboard cut-out variety. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The Brdy beavers' splendid dam. **BELOW**: Unlikely Bigfoot habitat next to Cambridge's Meadow Community Centre.

BEAVERING AWAY

Attempts to restore a wetland in the Brdy region of the Czech Republic, which had been drained to stop flooding at a now closed military base, got bogged down for more than seven years over issues of permits and land ownership without anything getting built, and no prospect of imminent resolution. However, such issues do not concern beavers. A colony of eight moved into the area and set to, building their dams in almost exactly the same places as the stalled artificial dams were supposed to be built. They also did it much more quickly, completing their constructions in just two days, rather than the several months the human-built dams would have taken to build. Bohumil Fišer, director of the Brdy Protected Land Administration (PLA) that would have built the dams, said: "They built the dams without any project documentation and for free. We are already seeing the emergence of a small pond and surrounding wetland, saving us CZK 30 million [£994,000]." Jaroslav Obermajer, head of the Nature and Landscape Protection Agency, said: "Beavers always know best. The places where they build dams are always chosen just right – better than when we design it on paper." *telegraph.co.uk, 9 Feb 2025.*

SAD FISH

After the Kaikyokan Aquarium in Shimonoseki, Japan, closed for renovation, staff noticed that their resident ocean sunfish seemed to be off colour. It had stopped eating its jellyfish and was rubbing its body against the sides of the tank. Initially they thought the fish might be suffering digestive problems or had picked up a parasite, but nothing they tried seemed to make any difference. Having run out of other options, one of the staff suggested: "Maybe he's lonely without the visitors?" Sceptical as to whether this could be the case, the sunfish's keeper stuck up some staff uniforms in front of the tank to see if it made a difference, "And then... the next day, the sunfish felt better!" he said. They have now printed out cardboard cut-outs of visitors and stuck them to the fish's tank, with very positive results. "Recently, it has been swimming in front of the tank and waving its fins, so it seems to be in good health again!" reported aquarium staff. During COVID, Tokyo's Sumida Aquarium used a similar strategy with their spotted garden eels, and successfully got volunteers to FaceTime the fish to keep them interested and encourage them to emerge from hiding places in their tank. *ndtv.com, 22 Jan 2025.*

CAMBRIDGE KONG?

Unlikely as Bigfoot living undetected in Britain may seem, there have been regular sightings of "manimals" across the UK, but almost entirely in secluded woodlands. The latest flap though, took place in urban Cambridge in late 2024, with two independent witnesses claiming to have seen an ape-like creature running on all-fours in the city's Arbury district. Anthony Chittenden believes he saw the creature on 27 October, saying, "Cycling down Arbury Road around midnight me and a friend both saw an ape-like creature, quite a bit shorter than a normal man, hairy and long arms. At first he was standing on back legs by -the side of the road, but then he ran on all fours into the field next to Meadows Community Centre. Very strange." He added, "My best guess could be an escaped monkey from a private collection? It was in October so in hindsight it could have been Hallowe'en related, but it really didn't look human. Ran off on all fours! If it was a costume or prank it was very, very convincing!" The creature also made an appearance on 16 December, when student Rosie Pettifer spotted it, also in Arbury. Writing on Facebook she said "I s*** you not. I saw a massive monkey thing running on all fours into the trees near the skate park?!" Describing herself as "Depressingly sober" at the time of her sighting, Rosie elaborated, saying, "I was walking home on Monday night after work at about 8pm (maybe a bit later). It seemed to be easily 6ft [1.8m], though was on all fours and to be honest as a young woman walking in the dark I was really quite scared! It wasn't a muntjac or anything similar for definite. I really could not pinpoint what it was other than a monkey-like creature!" No one in Cambridge, though, has reported losing a large monkey or ape, although the university does keep 250 non-human primates for research purposes. *dailystar.co.uk, 23 Dec 2024.*

> *"I saw a massive monkey thing running into the trees"*

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

Mystery cat clipping moves to Lincolsnhire, while a road in Wales is targeted by a phantom tart-flinger

CAT SHAVER MYSTERY [FT414:4-5, 430:24, 437:25, 445:22]

ForteanTimes
SPAWN OF THE BEAST

Following outbreaks of cat shaving in the Medway towns, Coventry, Lambourn and various other locations around the country, the South Holland area of Lincolnshire has become the new epicentre of the phenomenon, with cats in the villages of Pinchbeck and Kirton returning home with small patches neatly shaved out of their fur.

Police spokesperson Matthew Dickinson said the cats did not appear physically harmed, but small areas of their fur had been shaved "by some form of hair clippers". Elouise Evans from Pinchbeck said her cat Dolly had been targeted three times, having the fur on her belly, back and right leg clipped. "It's really upsetting if I'm honest – it's one of those things that can induce such anxiety in them," she said. A poster on the Pinchbeck Facebook group added "Yet again my cat has been shaved for no apparent reason. Her leg had been shaved the other day and today someone has decided to shave some fur off her back."

As with other outbreaks, the police have no leads as to who might be responsible, nor have they come up with a plausible motive for the attacks; they are, however, not happy about them, with Dickinson saying: "This is not a bit of fun and needs to stop now." *spaldingvoice.co.uk, 12 Feb; BBC News, 17 Feb 2025.* .

FACEBOOK

TREVIGNANO BVM [FT432:8, 448:21, 450:27]

ForteanTimes
STRANGE POWERS

After the Vatican introduced new rules for evaluating alleged miracles last year, one of the first victims of the decisive new approach was the weeping Virgin of Trevignano, near Rome. Its owner, Gisella Cardia, had bought the statue in 2016 at the Catholic pilgrimage site of Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and claimed that when she got home it had started crying tears of blood and transmitting messages to her, attracting pilgrims from all over Italy. The Vatican, though, declared her claims fraudulent.

LEFT: The weeping Virgin of Trevignano, dismissed by the Vatican as a fraud.

It was not only the Vatican that suspected fraud; a private investigator alleged that the blood on the statue in fact came from a pig, prompting the nearby town of Civitavecchia to open its own fraud investigation into Cardia. As part of this investigation Emiliano Giardina, a forensic geneticist, was commissioned to carry out DNA tests on blood from the statue and has concluded that it matches Cardia's genetic profile. He passed the results to authorities at the end of February, opening the possibility of a prosecution for fraud in the Italian courts.

Cardia's lawyer, Solange Marchignoli, however, insists that the presence of Cardia's DNA did not rule out a supernatural phenomenon, saying, "The DNA stain warrants further investigation. We are waiting to find out whether it's a mixed or single profile." She said it was obvious that analysis would find traces of Cardia's DNA because she had "kissed and handled the statue", and then suggested it might be mixed with that of the Virgin Mary. "Who can say? Do you know the Madonna's DNA?" Marchignoli asked.

As for Cardia, her whereabouts are unclear, with Marchignoli saying: "I don't know where she's currently praying, but I know for a fact that she is moved by a deep faith and has nothing to gain from this." Cardia had set up a foundation to collect donations from pilgrims visiting the statue to fund a centre for sick children, and the fate of this also remains ambiguous. *theguardian.com, 14 Feb 2025.*

DRONES [454:14-15]

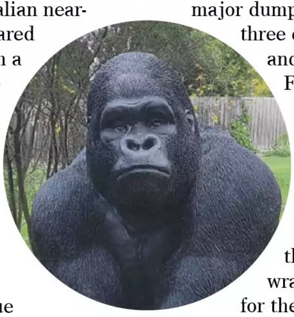
ForteanTimes
TURN OUT THE LIGHTS

USAF Plant 42 in California is a base for the B-21 Raider stealth bomber and home to top secret facilities operated by Boeing, NASA, and Northrop Grumman, as well as Lockheed Martin's famed 'Skunk Works'. Recently released documents reveal that the site, along with the adjacent Palmdale airport, with which Plant 42 shares runways, suffered repeated breaches of security by drones between 2 and 9 August 2024 despite previous assertions that Plant 42 had a "geo-fence" that "knocks out small drones that users attempt to fly overhead". USAF reports described the craft as rotary-wing drones with blinking lights and camera systems that repeatedly hovered over sensitive areas and operated beyond typical hobbyist capabilities. Patrol responses, off-base pursuit attempts, and coordination with the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA), completely failed to either stop the intrusion or identify any drone operators, leading official reports to conclude "currently there is no authorised detection or defeat capability available to the Defense Force". Up to five drones at a time were operational over the site and one succeeded in hovering motionless for 25 minutes over a secure area, despite the military's best efforts.

Security commentator Marik Von Rennenkampff described the events as "yet another remarkably brazen display of impunity by an unknown actor over critical infrastructure," adding that "as per usual, no hard evidence – such as imagery or video – has emerged to conclusively identify the nature of the objects. At the same time, that the objects intentionally displayed bright lights as they hovered for extended periods seems to conflict with any espionage hypothesis, only deepening this years-long mystery." He concluded: "How – despite the suite of advanced sensors available to the US government – can such brazen incursions continue with zero answers as to the nature or origin of these objects? Who is leaving the US military, law enforcement, and, ostensibly, the intelligence community utterly clueless? The FBI's UAP Working Group has its work cut out for it." *liberationtimes.com, 25 Feb 2025.*

GORILLA THEFT [FT439:10, 445:22]

While only half of Gary the Gorilla was retrieved after the life-sized fibreglass figure was stolen from a garden centre in Carluke, Scotland, last year, his Australian near-namesake, Garry, fared better. Swiped from a retirement community in St Helena, Melbourne, the 1.5m (5ft) tall figure was found shortly afterwards when police called in airborne support, who spotted the stolen statue stashed in a back yard in the Reservoir district, allowing officers to swiftly restore him to his rightful home. *9News (Melbourne) 3 Jul 2024.*



MYSTERY ACCUMULATIONS [455:16-17]

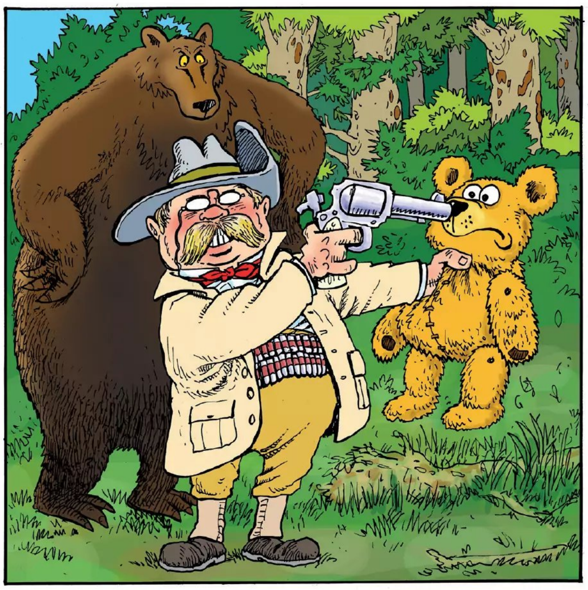
In Nottinghamshire, the Beeston Banana Plate has continued to make its appearance on the second day of the month, turning up on cue overnight in February and March, while elsewhere in the country other foodstuffs are mysteriously appearing in ways that baffle locals. Alongside the main A470 in Dolwyddelan, Conwy, residents have been repeatedly finding individually wrapped cakes abandoned on the roadside. Almond tarts, lemon tarts and Eccles cakes from Margaret's Country Kitchen, have been turning up, still in their plastic wrappers, on the grass verges for several months, and while some are decaying, many are still in date. "It's been going on for a few months now," said Paul Donnelly, who spotted the accumulations while walking his dogs. "Though this week, we've had quite a major dumping. There were three earlier this week, and another two on Friday." Locals suspect that a "phantom iced tart flinger" is throwing them from a moving vehicle, and Donnelly adds that "the plastic wrapping is bad news for the environment, as it won't decay. I just wish whoever is doing this would stop." Margaret's Country Kitchen said they were "deeply concerned" by the Flinger's behaviour, saying, "It was with great surprise that we learned someone who has purchased our delicious cakes would choose to treat them in this manner," adding, "We must ask the elusive 'phantom iced tart flinger' to desist from this practice." In Cornwall, rather than food, it is bras; in recent weeks, someone has tied seven bras to gates and fences in the lanes around the villages of Lerryn and Lostwithiel. Farmer Michael Irwin found a bright red one attached to a gate, then two weeks later a blue one turned up tied to nearby barbed wire. "It's become a bit of a talking point," he said. "Is it going to stick at seven – or are we going to have any more?" *BBC News, 22+28 Feb 2025.*

TOP: Garry the Gorilla, now safe at home after his abduction. **ABOVE**: The Beeston Banana Plate has continued to put in its mysterious monthly appearance.

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

290: TEDDY AND THE BEAR



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

US President Theodore ('Teddy') Roosevelt spared a bear cub during a hunt, and that's how teddy bears were invented...

The "truth"

It's almost true – except for that word "spared". In 1902, President Roosevelt, a keen killer of inedible animals, was taking part in a bear hunt in Mississippi. Almost all other details after that are disputed between different versions, but it went something along these lines: Teddy failed to bag a bear, so some of his courtiers tethered a captured specimen to a tree and went to fetch the President. They invited him to shoot it; he declined, saying that to do so would be unsporting and dishonourable. In the story that spread around the world in the following weeks, the bear was – explicitly or by implication – released to go about its business in the woods. In reality, "spared" turned out to mean killed. The bear was so badly damaged, having been brutalised during and after its capture, that euthanasia was the only option. Mind you, euthanasia may be an overly nice word; in some accounts the mercy killing was carried out with a hunting knife. The myth of the President who spared a bear cub (the actual specimen was an adult) has been retold countless times over the decades, and still appears in magazine articles and children's books today. Presumably the euthanasia was not public knowledge at the time, or else the manufacturers who created "Teddy's Bear" would, in the interest of veracity, have marketed a stuffed toy with stitched crosses for eyes and a knife sticking out of its throat...

Sources

www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-teddy-bear-once-seen-dangerous-influence-young-children-180983234/; www.ted.com/talks/jon_mooallem_how_the_teddy_bear_taught_us_compassion/transcript; www.ploddingthroughthepresidents.com/2022/12/teddybearorigin.html; www.nps.gov/thrb/learn/historyculture/storyofteddybear.htm

Mythchaser

One minor puzzle remains in the above tale: what happened to the corpse? A few sources claim that the euthanised bear was eaten by members of the hunting party. Can anyone track the truth or otherwise of that tantalising suggestion?

NECROLOG

This month, a famed American mentalist heads for the great TV studio in the sky and a noted neuroscientist and NDE researcher finds out if he was right...

THE AMAZING KRESKIN

George Joseph Kresge Jr found fame as a TV mentalist in the US under the name “The Amazing Kreskin”. Trained as a clinical psychologist, he was also deeply interested in stage magic and combined the two to create his act. He began performing mentalist tricks in his early teens, and despite his apparently reality-defying feats, he frequently reminded audiences that he was not psychic and did not possess any supernatural powers. Instead, he explained that his stunts were the result of his ability to read certain cues, like body language, and use the power of suggestion to guide people’s actions.

Kreskin made his TV debut on *The Steve Allen Show* in 1964 and swiftly became a regular on the US talk show circuit, going on to host his own shows *The Amazing World of Kreskin* and *The New Kreskin Show* for much of the 1970s. He specialised in psychological tricks that looked like magic – asking people to put their fingers on objects that would seem to move, or guessing what card had been pulled from a deck. In his live shows, a regular trick was to find his own pay cheque for his current performance, hidden by the audience. If he did not find it, he did not get paid for that day, only failing a dozen times over his long career. Kreskin’s disavowal of psychic ability did not, however, prevent him making predictions about the future. In 2002, he predicted that there would be a mass UFO sighting over Las Vegas on 6 June between the hours of 9.45pm and midnight that would be witnessed by thousands of people, promising that if there were no sighting, he would donate $50,000 to a charity. Hundreds gathered, but nothing turned up, and Kreskin then claimed that “the sighting prediction was a total fabrication in order to prove people’s susceptibility to suggestion post-9/11”, although he asserted that a few people had sighted “glowing green orbs”, which absolved him of the need to cough up $50k.

ForteanTimes
BIZARRE BOARD GAMES
KRESKIN'S ESP
Bermuda Triangle

ABOVE: The Amazing Kreskin enjoying his copy of FT in January 2022.

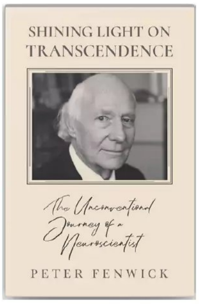
Kreskin peaked in the 1970s and early 1980s, and never really developed an audience outside the US and Canada, but he never stopped performing; his last television appearance was predicting the Super Bowl on Fox Business on 2 May 2023, and his last live performance took place on 7 March 2024 – a ‘pendulum seminar’ on Zoom. Asked by the *Huffington Post* when he might retire, he said: “Exactly 10 days after I drop dead.” In later years, though, Kreskin’s star faded – he claimed advances in electronic technology made his job harder – and he diversified into other areas. He taught classes for law enforcement groups, which focused “on psychological methods such as jogging lost memories through relaxation techniques or detecting lies through body language and voice inflections”; he wrote several books; earned a few acting credits (usually playing himself); offered mental training to boxers; created a dating website for people interested in the supernatural; and even promoted a Kreskin board game. Kreskin lived all of his life in Caldwell, New Jersey, and never married or had children. He died from complications of dementia at an assisted living facility in Wayne, New Jersey.

George Joseph Kresge Jr (The Amazing Kreskin), US TV Mentalist; born 12 January 1935, West Caldwell, New Jersey; died 10 December 2024, Wayne, New Jersey, aged 89.

PETER FENWICK

Doctor Peter Fenwick was already established as a neuroscientist and psychiatrist, working at London’s Maudsley Clinic, where he specialised in epilepsy, when he discovered the book that would change his life: Raymond Moody’s 1976 best seller about Near Death Experiences (NDEs), *Life After Life*. He was initially unimpressed, dismissing it as “psychobabble”, but a year later one of his patients recounted a particularly vivid NDE to him and, Fenwick said, “I was able to look at him, discuss it with him and see in fact that this was no psychobabble, it was a real experience, and that NDEs were in fact real.” While science could not provide a rational explanation for NDEs (and indeed still can’t) Fenwick changed his mind and devoted much of the rest of his life to their study, although he remained head of the Maudsley’s epilepsy unit until he retired in 1997.

After his initial attempt to launch NDE research at St Thomas’ Hospital in London was blocked, Fenwick set up a project at a Southampton hospital to study bilocation, in which patients report looking down on their prone bodies on the operating table as they seemingly float above it. This

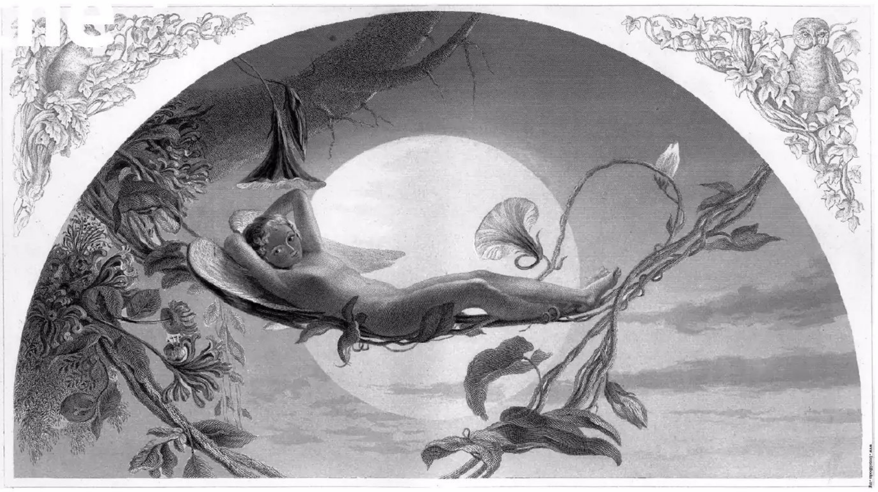

SHINING LIGHT ON TRANSCENDENCE
The Unconventional Journey of a Neuroscientist
PETER FENWICK

involved placing cards with writing and pictures on the ceiling of operating theatres, in case they could be seen by patients leaving their bodies. Although results proved inconclusive, Fenwick continued to collect data, and when he appeared on a TV programme, *Glimpses of Death* in 1988, he received more than 2,000 letters from people claiming to have experienced NDEs. This led to several books exploring people's NDEs, written with his wife Elizabeth, and the foundation of the International Association for Near-Death Studies UK (IANDS-UK). Fenwick's strong medical research background made him a powerful and authoritative voice for the reality of NDEs, enabling him to dismiss the standard scientific debunking of them as delusions of a dying brain starved of oxygen by showing that pilots, who are routinely subjected to anoxia in training, do not experience anything like NDEs when deprived of oxygen, just confusion and disorientation.

Fenwick's work on NDEs led him to become an advocate for research on the link between consciousness and spirituality being taken seriously as a field of scientific study, explaining his work through lectures, books and, eventually, appearances on YouTube.

As well as working on NDEs, Fenwick carried out some of the first research into the effect of meditation on brain activity, which included recording George Harrison's brainwaves as he meditated, and Fenwick ruefully recalled in later years that if he had retained that EEG trace, it would have funded his retirement. In a recent interview, Fenwick said: "There is no death, I know that now; there is death of the body, but there is no death of the individual person. I don't fear it all. I'm looking forward to it."

Dr Peter Brook Cadogan Fenwick, neuroscientist, psychiatrist and NDE researcher; born 25 May 1935, Nairobi, Kenya; died 22 Nov 2024, London, aged 89.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

LAST LADIES OF THE LAKE

So, you want to live forever? Follow these instructions carefully. Bring warm clothes, a good pair of boots and plenty of Kendal Mint Cake. Then head out to Kinder Scout in Derbyshire on Easter Eve and walk for the heights. Reach the small tarn below the summit before midnight. Consume the Kendal Mint Cake. Then, stand quietly and wait until distant bells chime. If the wind's not too wild and the Moon doesn't hide her face, you may glimpse a figure bathing in the water. See her, they say, and you'll never die.

YOU MAY GLIMPSE A FIGURE BATHING IN THE WATER. SEE HER, THEY SAY, AND YOU'LL NEVER DIE

This elusive woman haunts once annually a moorland pool just below Kinder Scout. Though known today as Mermaid's Pool, its folklore is confused: our 19th-century records are hopelessly tangled. Summed together, we know the following. The female spirit of Kinder lived not in the pool itself, but in a now vanished rocky grotto at the top of the nearby Downfall, a waterfall that often blows a huge head of vapour above Kinder. This lair-and-bath pairing is rare in British folklore, but not unique. A similar configuration can be found at Malham, where the Queen of the Fairies resides behind a waterfall and bathes in a much closer pool. What marks Kinder out is its elevation and exposure: the setting lends the story an airy, haunted quality.

The Kinder mermaid, in any case, left her cave at Easter to go and bathe, and we know that crowds came to see her believing that if they set their eyes upon her they would gain immortality. She liked people to live for a long time. She once seduced a local and granted him eternal life. He gave her a pocket watch in return. This is surely the most charming detail in English folklore.

Not everyone was convinced. In 1892, the novelist Mary Ward set part of her once famous *David Grieve* on Kinder and dismissed the mermaid outright, calling her a tourist invention from Manchester! But Ward's own research notes show that she misunderstood references to a witch drowning in the same place. Later writers, perhaps confusing the lady of Kinder with saltwater mermaids, added bloodlust and drowning to the spirit's repertoire. The original story is stranger, and gentler. She offered life, not death.

In the west of England, there were several freshwater spirits of this type: I think of them as the last ladies of the lake. The Kinder Mermaid's closest cousins – at Rostherne, Acqualate, Black Mere – promised not swords, but wishes, gold, stories, and supernatural warnings. Miss Kinder's gift was immortality. Pilgrims no longer climb to her pool at midnight at Easter and more's the shame. However, if you are really keen to give up on aging you now know what to do.

Simon Young is the editor of *The Cottingley Fairy Photographs: New Approaches to Fairies, Fakes and Folklore.*

New science and mad scientists

NIGEL WATSON rounds up the latest news and views from the world of ufology

NEW SCIENCE

The New Science of Unidentified Aerospace-Undersea Phenomena (UAP) is a study of scientific research on UFOs around the world by more than 30 authors, scientists and researchers led by Professor Kevin Knuth, Department of Physics, University at Albany. It aims to "clarify the existing global and historical scientific narrative around UAP" with an emphasis on initiatives outside the United States.

In this 164-page-long work, the authors intend to "enable future studies to draw on the great depth of experience documented to date". There is a large section on studies carried out in the US since 1947, followed by briefer surveys of research in Russia, China, France and Canada. Field studies like those conducted by Project Hessdalen at Hessdalen in Norway since 1984, and SETI projects are also included. After detailing several UFO organisations, by page 80 there is a section on UAPs and nuclear weapons, and another about "Transmedium Travel and Water" that goes on to look at mystery submarines and Unidentified Submerged Objects (USOs).

The authors admit that most of their focus is on the physical sciences, but they do include a section on the importance of the social sciences. However, they disapprovingly note that these studies centre on people's beliefs and perceptions and avoid the issue of whether UAPs are real or not. It is their view that social scientists should "consider more openly the potential existence of UAP and the profound implications this could have on society, research methodologies, and the foundational assumptions of their disciplines."

The last part of the main document presents the recommended methods for collecting usable data on UAPs, this would include the use of satellite technology and optical, infrared and ultraviolet cameras and sensors. An Appendix presents "Prominent Past Efforts" and profiles such important UAP luminaries as; Dr Pierre Guerin, Dr Richard F Haines, Paul R Hill, Dr J. Allen Hynek, Dr Bruce Maccabee, Dr James McDonald, Dr Donald Menzel, Dr Claude Poher, Dr Harley Rutledge, Dr Peter Sturrock, Dr Michael Swords and Dr Jacques F Vallee.

Despite its aim of highlighting the global nature of this phenomenon, it fails to mention African, Australian and UK research, and there is no mention of alien abduction research. Otherwise, it is a comprehensive guide to the subject as viewed by those petitioning the US government.

www.arxiv.org/abs/2502.06794

THIS IS A VERY HARD THING TO SHARE

EURO CRASH

The European Crash Retrieval Initiative (ECRI) is a project led by UAP Sweden and the Ocean X Team, with the support of the The Vanishing and Appearing Sources during a Century of Observations (VASCO) Project and an interdisciplinary group of civilian scientists and experts. Their ambition is to map and analyse alleged contemporary and historical UFO/UAP crash sites in Europe.

The ECRI website notes that it aims to: "Create an independent, community-driven project, empowering ordinary citizens to uncover answers that they previously appear to have been denied.

"Identify credible crash sites using data-protected information-gathering and applying methods stemming from criminal forensics, science, and psychology, with the oversight of professionals from within these fields.

"Visit and examine these crash sites in order to safely gather any materials.

"Share our findings with scientists for further examination.

"Share any discoveries with the public in a transparent manner."

www.ecr-initiative.org/

DRAGONS AND DISCS

'Professor' Simon Holland (pictured above) has a YouTube channel where he regularly reports on UAPs. He looks like an archetypical mad scientist with round glasses and a wild outcrop of grey hair. This image is enhanced by the pseudo-laboratory setting of his cellar studio at his home in France. He was a producer for the prestigious BBC Horizon science documentary series, but we should note he is a "professor" by nickname only.

One reddit user warns: "Don't be fooled by the whole 'eccentric scientist' thing he's got going on. It's just branding. People like this rely on the fact that most people take things at face value."

I must admit that he has a tendency to regard UAPs as secret military devices and/or the products of secret psychological operations. In a recent posting, "News Hard to Share", he begins: "...for the first time since running this humble YouTube channel I'm genuinely scared some information was shared with me that has actually shaken me to the core. It's deeply serious, it's deeply dark, it's very, very, very, um, worrying, and I actually need to talk to you about it."

Delivered with theatrical looks to camera and pauses, this staggering information, mainly gained from a certain Colonel Halt, is that the Rendlesham Forest Incident was caused by the testing of some type of psionic weapon. And, those who were influenced by it were interrogated, threatened and even drugged by a crack team of operatives afterwards. Not exactly world-shattering or verifiable, just another set of rumours that breed and flourish around Rendlesham.

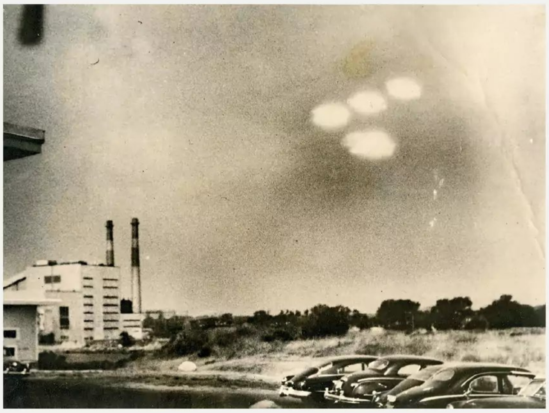
When reporting on the European Crash Retrieval Initiative, he observes that ancient sites like Stonehenge and ancient sacred places where churches were built could indicate locations where UFOs crashed in the past. The holy relics exhibited in these churches, he suggests, could be bits of retrieved UFO wreckage rather than the remains of dead saints.

Similar ideas were put forward by FW Holiday in his 1973 book *The Dragon and the Disc*, where he equated prehistoric structures and legends of dragons (sky serpents) with those of modern-day UFO sightings. Nothing is ever new in ufology!

www.youtube.com/watch?v=zscGlr2qHPA

Space-age sea shanties

A trip to Lytham St Annes finds **JENNY RANDLES** contemplating UFO sightings at the seaside



LEFT: Shell R Alpert's UFO photo, taken in Salem, Massachusetts, on 16 July 1952.

My annual treat as a child was a trip to seaside towns like Blackpool. Or, if we had the money, we could – as the TV adverts went – 'go abroad', to the Isle of Man.

That slogan existed because this self-governing Crown Dependency in the middle of the Irish Sea is one of the world's oldest democracies. Although politically aligned now with the UK, it still has its own parliament, the Tynwald, and legal system.

This Spring, recuperating from medical treatment, I took a trip to the seaside with close family. By pure chance the journey was to the last place I gave a lecture some years ago – Lytham St Annes. It was a lovely break. The fine Spring weather raised my spirits, and my mind focused on seaside UFO sightings that have proven pivotal across the years.

The Isle of Man was brought to mind only recently when a stranger turned up at my door doing a survey. When I told her my occupation, she smiled – she had seen my book on the mysteries of the Isle of Man on the ferries that sail to and from the mainland where her family live.

We chatted about the folklore of the island, and I recalled for her one of the stories from there. She was well aware of the reason why the island's flag shows three legs in a wheel, or triskelion. But not how the origin myth is very much like a UFO sighting .

Manannan is the local entity who protects the island from unwanted visitors by generating thick mists, hiding it from view. This is something you can still witness if you arrive by ferry. There are accounts of intervention into human affairs by this being, including one in which shipwrecked sailors were washed up alive on the beach 2,000 years or so ago.

While they were praising their gods for their delivery, the sky parted and Manannan himself emerged from the swirling mists in a form that seems to modern eyes very UFO-like. It consisted of three legs fixed together, rotating slowly to create the impression of one fearful object surrounded by stormy clouds, and emitting a terrifying noise that filled the beach.

With modern eyes we would likely see this as storm clouds or ball lightning rolling across the path of the stranded sailors. But the epic story of this rescue created a UFO-like legend whose longevity dwarfs the 78 years the term 'flying saucer' has been in use.

> I advised new BUFORA investigators that our job was to solve cases and put witnesses at ease

Another seaside town I once visited was Salem, Massachusetts, famous around the world for its witch trials in the late 17th century, when almost certainly innocent women were put to death in the belief that they could cast spells. So, of course, when on 16 July 1952, US Coast Guardsman Shell R Alpert managed to take a photograph of four UFOs over the town, that picture got far more attention than it likely would have done had it been taken a few miles away in Boston.

The likelihood is that the Salem UFO photo – shot through a window – does not reveal the passage of a fleet of alien invaders, but of lights inside a building, reflected off the window.

Outright hoaxes occur, of course, but they are less common than accidental circumstances that create a misperception. This is why UFO investigation – indeed all research we conduct into the paranormal – is most often about showing that the true nature of an event was something different from what was perceived by the witness. And it's why I used to advise new recruits as UFO investigators for BUFORA that our job was to solve cases and put witnesses at ease. Much of the time that is exactly what good investigators do. An unresolved case should be a rarity, and a failure to give closure to the witness a disappointment. But it does happen, and in those cases it's the reason why we are still investigating many years later.

Another seaside sighting occurred in February 1979, when all hell broke loose over a stretch of coast near Southport. Strange lights were seen by multiple witnesses, so their reality was assured. Whatever they were actually shook the pier – just a few miles from the one we walked on at Lytham St Annes – as a rather scared security guard watched something pass low overhead in the early hours. He saw a military fighter flying low over the Irish Sea, in what seemed to be rapid pursuit of a ball of red fire ahead of it.

This man was completely unaware of the events near Southport minutes before, when the denizens of a caravan park had been shaken awake. He was sure he had seen a military fighter pursuing a weird orange ball. According to the powers that be (who were rather slow to tell the truth), there was a US 'exercise' going on at the time. But it had not been prearranged and took locals by surprise. And their MP was told it was not the USAF. The commander stated. "Definitely NOT (our) F-111s, and that's official." So was it perhaps the US Navy?

I pursued the MoD for longer than the local MP and was told about the USAF low-flying jet explanation they had mooted. "Clearly our suggestion was wrong. But then it was never put forward as an explanation in the first place."

Whatever happened over that coast that night was real. Too many people saw, felt and heard things for it to be otherwise. But whether the MoD or the USAF knew the answer has stayed untold for nearly five decades.

As I stood on that pier in the sunshine on the Lancashire coast all these years later, with the occasional aircraft buzzing overhead, and looking across the scene of a case I have never forgotten, I did wonder.

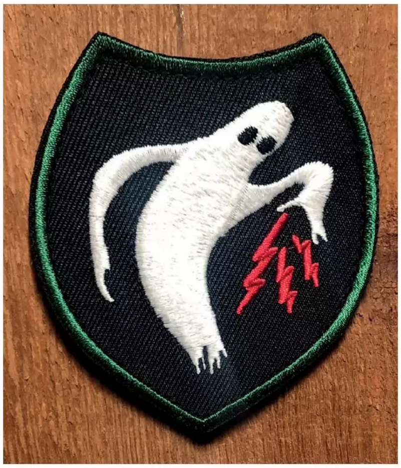
Will we ever find out what happened then? And does this long wait hint at something the UK and US would both prefer us not to know?

THE PHANTOM MENACE THAT BEAT HITLER!

BRIAN J ROBB EXPLORES THE IMAGINATIVE DECEPTIONS OF THE GHOST ARMY, A TOP SECRET US ARMY TROOP THAT PLAYED A DECISIVE ROLE IN THE DEFEAT OF HITLER.

In the latter stages of World War II a new Allied offensive was launched by a unique US Army unit prior to D-Day. Officially known as the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops, this squad's leadership was not made up of regular fighting men. Instead, the US Army recruited art school students, professional artists, advertising executives, scenic designers, comic book creators, and even magicians – anyone skilled in deception or propaganda. This elite unit was known colloquially as the 'Ghost Army', and its existence was a secret for five decades after the end of the war.

The American Ghost Army initiative drew its inspiration from an earlier British-led action known as Operation Bertram. In 1942, the Allied forces – led by Field Marshal Montgomery – pioneered the art of battlefield deception. The Eighth Army followed an ingenious plan devised by Brigadier Dudley Clarke to mislead Montgomery's German opposite, 'Desert Fox' Erwin Rommel, about the Allied plan of attack. Employing tactics of the Middle East Command Camouflage Directorate (led by filmmaker Geoffrey Barkas), a series of physical deceptions was devised to convince Rommel that the Allies were on the move. Using dummy life-size tanks (frames made of timber covered in palm fronds) while camouflaging other vehicles (real tanks were disguised as large trucks), the unit was able to move men and matériel into key positions without arousing suspicion.

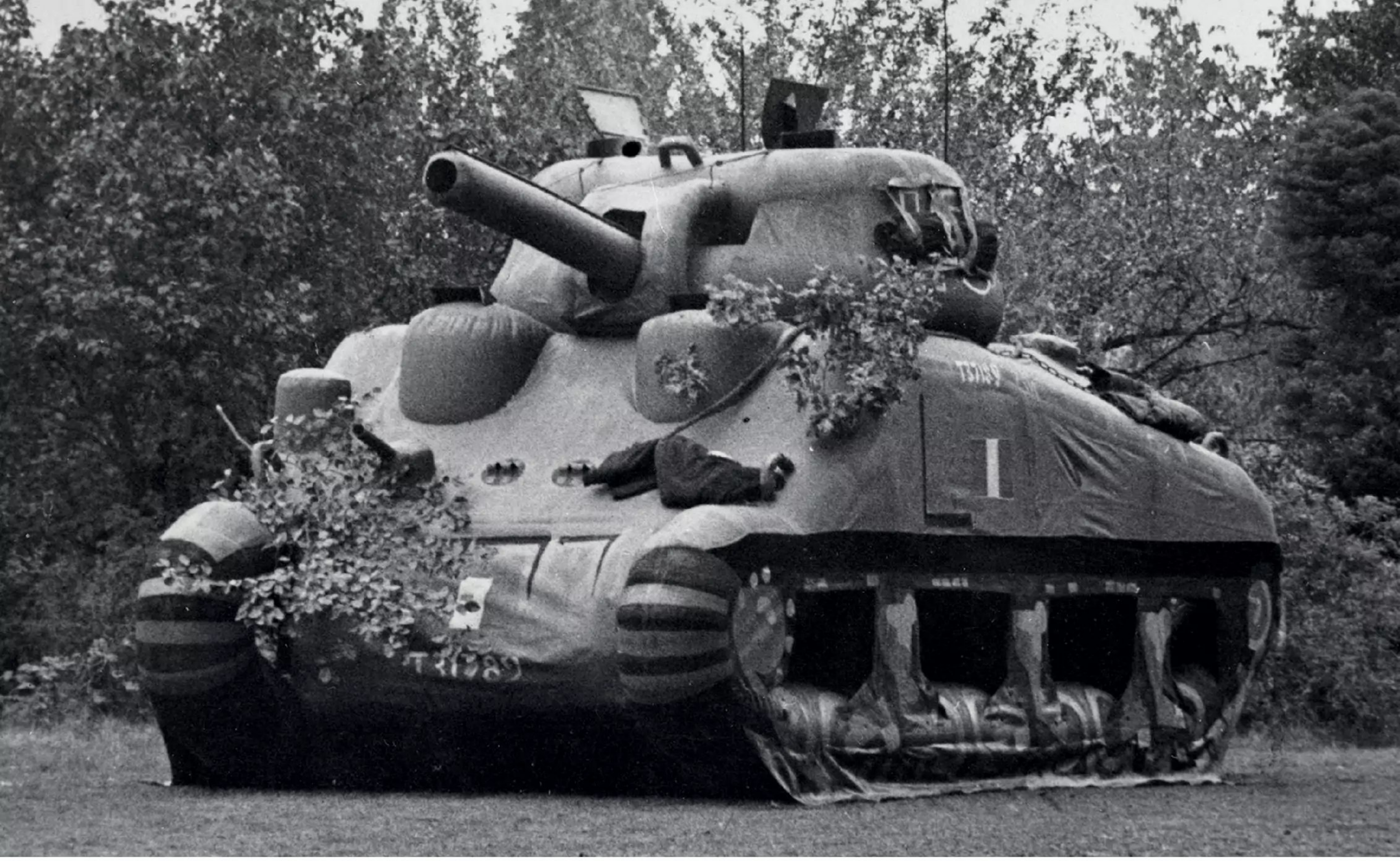


THE GHOST ARMY'S EXISTENCE WAS KEPT SECRET FOR FIVE DECADES

The planned attack in the north was hidden, while false movements towards the south suggested a different direction of attack. The seeming absence of offensive vehicles (the tanks), it was hoped, would suggest to the Germans that no major attack was planned. Initially, real trucks were parked out in the open, only to be replaced by the disguised tanks just before action commenced. It proved successful and helped secure the success of the Battle of El Alamein in late 1942.

Key to such simple mechanical deceptions was the 603rd Camouflage Engineer Battalion, whose members developed skills in making things virtually disappear (men, armaments, matériel) while also making other events appear to be happening elsewhere (troop movements, armament buildups). Such practices began on the home front early in the war when the US feared airborne German attacks on the American mainland. There was great concern about sabotage by US-based 'fifth columnists' acting on behalf of the Nazis. To avoid such eventualities, important US military installations (aircraft factories, ammunition storage centres) were disguised so they could not be easily seen from the air. These early efforts, such as painting tarmac to look like fields and using netting as disguise, fed in to the work of the Camouflage Battalion in the field in Europe.

Such basic deceptive activities were very much standard practice (on both sides) during WWII. However, they rarely went beyond simple camouflage and engineering solutions, largely due to lack of time to plan anything more elaborate. The US Ghost Army was seen as an answer to



FACING PAGE: The Ghost Army insignia patch and (bottom of page) Colonel Harry L Reeder. **ABOVE:** The Ghost Army unit used inflatable military equipment, such as this dummy Sherman tank, to fool German forces. **BELOW LEFT:** Major Ralph Ingersoll. **BELOW RIGHT:** Colonel Billy Harris.

that problem, a specialised unit that could develop ever more complex deceptions drawing on a range of creative avenues not previously considered in the heat of battle. The US Army brass knew that to be as effective as possible in devising and using such unusual techniques they would need to reach beyond just Army personnel, drawing upon a host of civilian creative industries in their search for imaginative inspirations that would outwit the enemy.

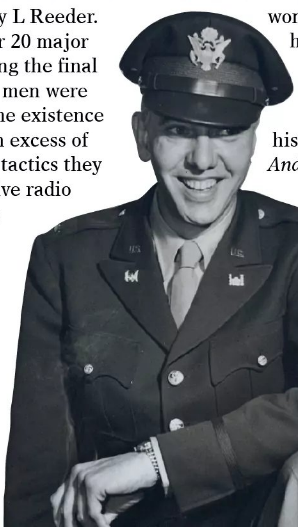
RAISING GHOSTS

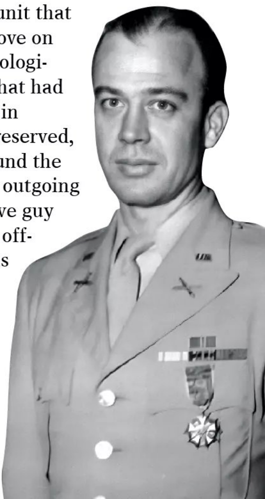
The Ghost Army was made manifest on 20 January 1944. It was the first dedicated mobile tactical deception unit the US Army ever established, and it was innovative in taking a multimedia approach to psychological warfare. At its height, the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops had 80 officers and over 1,000 soldiers, all under the overall command of Colonel Harry L Reeder. They were involved in over 20 major deception operations during the final year of the war. These few men were charged with simulating the existence of two entire battalions (in excess of 30,000 soldiers) using any tactics they could devise, from deceptive radio transmissions to elaborate physical disguises and misdirection. Everything the Ghost Army did was labelled Top Secret; the exploits of these combat con artists would be kept under wraps until the 1990s.

The Ghost Army didn't emerge from nowhere: many months of thought and planning went into its creation. The concept had certainly been inspired by the success of Operation Bertram, but the ambition for the new unit was even greater. Although the 23rd would feature fake tanks that couldn't move and imaginary artillery that couldn't fire, it would prove to be one of the most successful units in the final year of the Second World War – virtually without firing a shot.

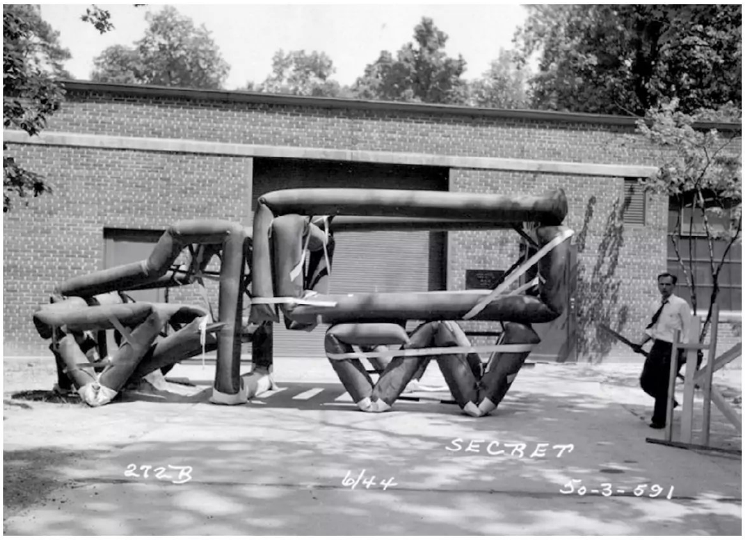
The driving force behind the establishment of the Ghost Army was a pair of mismatched US Army planners. Major Ralph Ingersoll was a celebrity journalist and best-selling author who (according to the *New York Times*) had a high opinion of himself and his abilities and was a notorious womaniser. Born in 1900, Ingersoll had graduated from Yale in 1921. He sought his fortune in the gold and copper mines of Arizona, Mexico, and California, turning his experiences into a 1923 book, *In And Under Mexico*. As a journalist, Ingersoll worked for *The New Yorker*, becoming managing editor. He helped launch *Life* magazine in the 1930s and established his own left-wing newspaper called *PM* in 1940, writing editorials arguing for America's active involvement in the war. Aged 41, Ingersoll was drafted, but he didn't go quietly, complaining that publishers (like him) should be exempt from military service. Ingersoll was described by his own biographer as a man who had a loose relationship with the truth. Roy Hoopes said of the Major: "He'd say anything to get what he wanted." After serving in North Africa, true to his roots Ingersoll wrote a book about his time in action, *The Battle is the Pay Off*. When he was sent to London in the second half of 1943, Colonel Billy Harris, head of the US Special Plans Branch, was waiting for him.

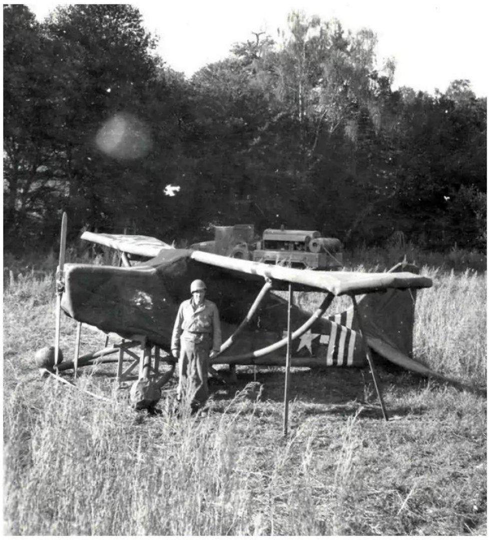
Harris was a decade or so younger than Ingersoll, but came from a traditional military family; his father was a General. He graduated from West Point in 1933 and quickly secured an Army commission. In 1943 Harris was given the task of developing a dedicated unit that would develop and improve on the deception and psychological warfare techniques that had been used so effectively in North Africa in 1942. A reserved, practical man, Harris found the ideal collaborator in the outgoing Ingersoll, a wildly creative guy who came up with many off-the-wall ideas that Harris then had to adapt to practical reality. Inger-



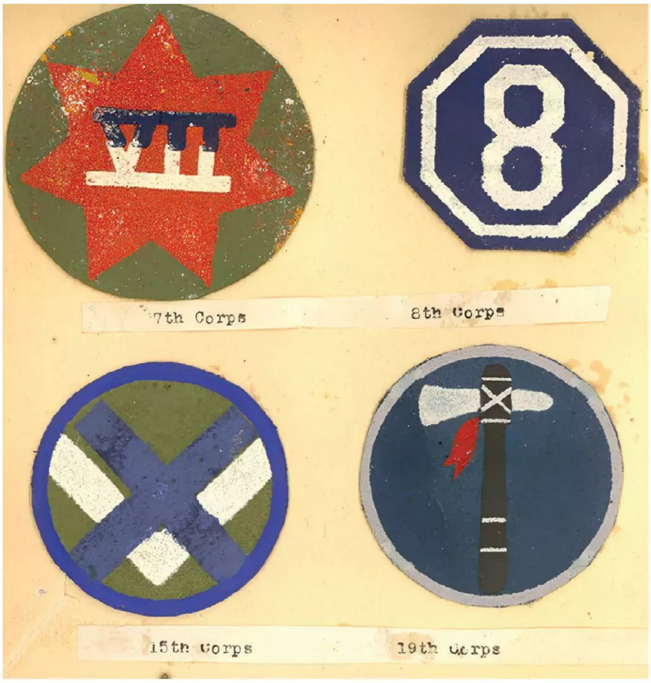


PHOTOS: THE GHOST ARMY LEGACY PROJECT





ABOVE LEFT: The rubber frame of a dummy truck. These inflatables were built around a skeleton of inflatable tubing, which was then covered by a rubberised canvas exterior. **ABOVE RIGHT:** An inflated rubber L-5 reconnaissance plane used by the Ghost Army in 1944. **BELOW:** To fool German spies into thinking that there were more troops ready to invade France than there really were, the Ghost Army created several fake military units, with phony uniform patches to match.



soll took to the world of military deception like he'd been doing it all his life. A creative thinker, he could throw out a handful of ideas in response to any problem posed to him; most were entirely impractical, but from Ingersoll's flights of fancy, Harris could shape something altogether more effective. Where Ingersoll was an ideas man, Harris was very much a no-nonsense figure focused on implementation.

Ingersoll summed up his idea for the Ghost Army in an unpublished memoir drafted after the war: "My prescription was for a battalion that could imitate a whole corps of either armour or infantry… a super secret battalion of specialists in the art of manipulating our antagonists' decisions… When I first dreamed it up, I considered it one of my more improbable dreams, but damned if the Pentagon planners didn't buy it whole." He took to referring to the creative personnel of the Ghost Army as "my con artists", noting: "The con artist's job is to hoodwink the enemy instead of slugging it out with him." According to Ingersoll, the concept was "my only contribution to my country's armed forces."

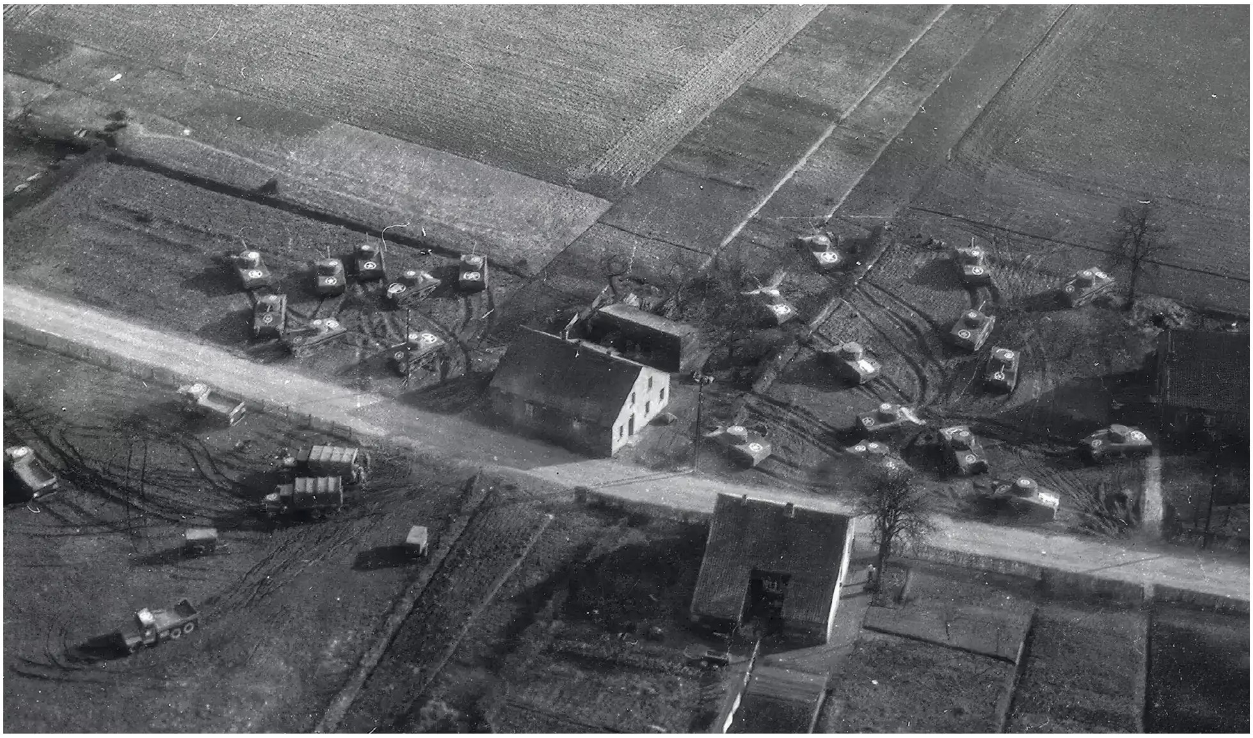
The idea was quickly approved at the highest level of the US Army. The top American commander in the European theatre, General Jake Devers, took Ingersoll's ideas on board, approving them in a Christmas Eve 1943 memo to the Washington command. Without Devers recognising the potential in what could easily have seemed like a crazy scheme that would divert much needed resources, it is unlikely that the Ghost Army would ever have seen the light of day. Devers's replacement, General Dwight D Eisenhower, also enthusiastically backed the idea when he took over a year into the operation in January 1945.

"THE CON ARTIST'S JOB IS TO HOODWINK THE ENEMY INSTEAD OF SLUGGING IT OUT WITH HIM"

To Colonel Harris, Ingersoll was "a cocky little man", but in his straight-laced military mind he could see the con artist's value. According to Harris, Ingersoll had "more cheek than imagination", but the Colonel recognised in the older man an imagination he could shape and mould to produce practical ideas that could be effective in misleading the enemy. Ingersoll didn't see this approach as deception but manipulation; they were engaged in "the art and practice of manipulating your enemies' mental processes so that they come to a false conclusion about what you are up to."

While deception had always been a part of warfare, from the Trojan Horse to the Battle of El Alamein, the Ghost Army took things to previously unimagined heights. The unit combined multifarious techniques in pursuit of a single aim: to throw the enemy off track, to convince them of an illusion, whether it be a build-up of troops in the wrong place or a seeming withdrawal elsewhere. Anything was fair game.

Harris and Ingersoll realised they needed a team of officers with a particular set of skills if they were to exploit the possibilities of the Ghost Army to their fullest. More than simply brave fighting men, the new unit needed imaginative, creative individuals who could engage in blue sky thinking (like Ingersoll) but also be capable of producing practical outcomes



THE GHOST ARMY LEGACY PROJECT

ABOVE: Aerial photo showing inflatable dummy tanks and trucks set up near the Rhine in Germany as part of Operation Viersen, March 1945.

(like Harris). They placed recruitment ads throughout art schools in the US, hoping to attract artists and illustrators who could conceive of new ways of fighting the enemy. They also sought out engineers who were capable of thinking beyond such mundane (but nonetheless vital) wartime activities as repairing tanks or blowing up bridges.

The 23rd Headquarters Special Troops unit was initially formed in Tennessee, combining a trio of existing squads with a brand new unit. The largest element was the 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion Special, made up of 379 men who engaged in visual deception. They specialised in the use of newly-devised inflatable rubber tanks, fake trucks and artillery, and the creation of deceptive tableaux – all in the interest of deceiving aerial surveillance or reconnaissance by German forces. The unit had already been doing such work, but an influx of new artists helped direct their efforts more effectively.

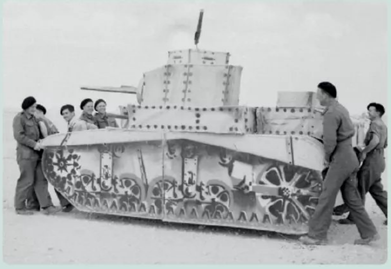
The 603rd was joined by the 296-strong Signal Company Special which created fake radio traffic (all enacted from intricate scripts) to fool the enemy. Similarly, the

BRITAIN'S FORCES OF DECEPTION

An earlier Allied military deception unit that pre-dated the prolific Ghost Army took part in various activities under Operation Fortitude – an overall deception and propaganda strategy that aimed to throw the Axis forces off balance over the planned Allied invasion of Europe in spring 1944. A trio of deception units were involved: Ops (B), R Force, and A Force. Ops (B) was established in the UK in 1943 under the command of Colonel John Jervis-Read and used its very limited resources to deploy various attempts at physical deception and the running of double agents who provided intelligence. Their attempt to convince German forces of imminent invasions in France and Norway did not succeed, offering an example of rare failure in the field of Allied military deception. There was no response from the Germans, whose forces were already convinced of action in the Mediterranean area. Jervis-Read was replaced by Noel Wild who launched a more successful attempt to direct German attention to Norway.

A Force, under Brigadier Dudley Clarke, dated back to 1941 and operated out of Cairo and across North Africa. A Force was one of the first units to employ tactical deception using dummy tanks and managed in January 1941 to fake the presence of a British paratrooper regiment using dummy gliders, fake uniforms, radio traffic, and information leaks a full two years before actual Allied paratroopers landed in North Africa. Noel Wild gained experience as part of A Force before being reassigned to Ops (B).

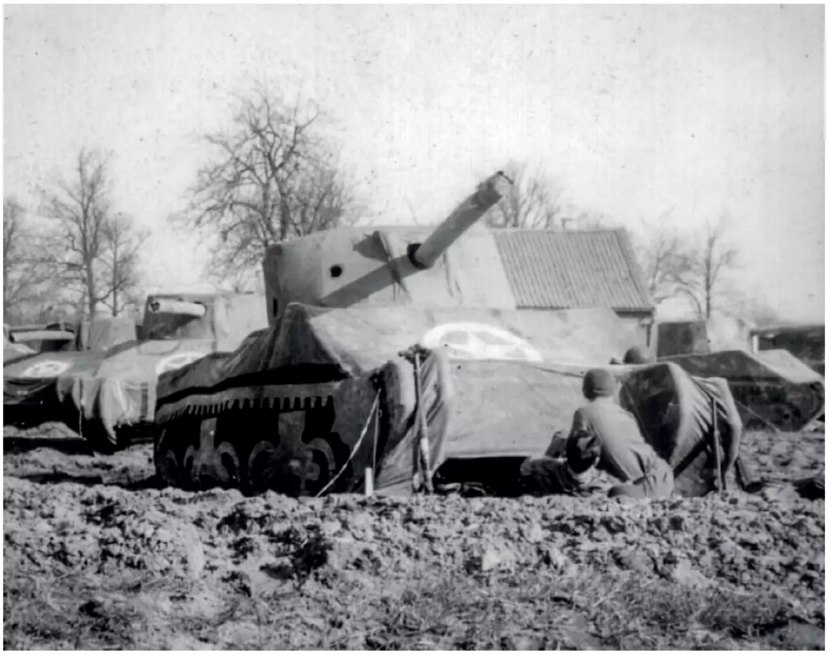
Finally, R Force was another British deception outfit headed by Lieutenant Colonel David Strangeways, who'd also originally served as part of A Force. Strangeways' R Force specialised in signals and camouflage deception, broadcasting synthetic sounds of tanks in battle in France coupled with the construction of decoy airfields and other counterfeit military sites. These three forces of deception were brought together in an all-out attempt under Operation Fortitude to convince the Germans that the planned Allied landings would take place in the Pas-de-Calais area and not on the Normandy beaches as was the case in reality. It proved an effective strategy that served to reduce the resistance the Allies ultimately met on D-Day itself. For more, see David Sutton, "Bodyguard of Lies", **FT185:38-45.**

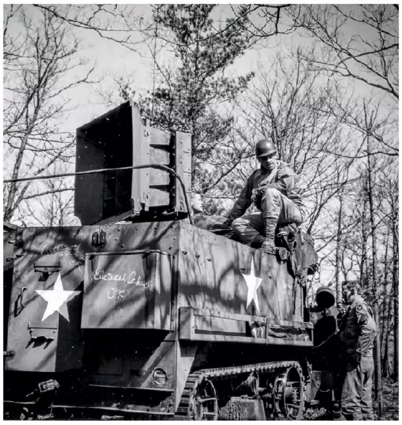


PIEMAGS/ARCHIVE/MILITARY / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: British Troops carrying a dummy Stuart tank in North Africa, 1942.

PHOTOS: THE GHOST ARMY LEGACY PROJECT





LEFT: Ground shot of dummy tanks set up for Operation Viersen in March 1945. **BELOW:** Soldiers from the 3132 with a half-track equipped with sonic deception equipment. The soldiers used the sonic halftracks to play sounds of troop movements that could be heard 15 miles away. **BOTTOM:** Soldiers use stencils to paint bumper markings on a jeep for the 90th Division, February 1945.

3133rd Signal Service Company was folded into the Ghost Army, with its 145 men engaged in the creation of sound effects to simulate troop movements, playing out sounds from huge speakers mounted on the back of half-track armoured vehicles. These noises helped create the illusion of a full force Company moving about under the cover of darkness, when in reality it was simply a handful of men and a series of imaginative sound effects.

The final element that made up the core Ghost Army was the 168 men of the 406th Engineering Combat Company Special, trained fighting soldiers who provided perimeter security for the other units to warn of ambush or close enemy surveillance. To aid their fellows in deception, the engineers dug out fake tank tracks to convince the enemy of major movements of equipment and men. Finally, the Headquarters Company provided 1,000 regular soldiers charged with creating the impression of a far larger force that could be seen as threatening by the enemy.

THE IMAGINATION WAR

The Ghost Army leadership was made up of a diverse bunch of would-be soldiers many of whom had professional skills not usually applicable to the US Army. Among the unit's members were fashion designer Bill Blass, painter Ellsworth Kelly, and photographer Art Kane. This trio were emblematic of the recruits Ingersoll and Harris prized. They were not regular 'military minds'; they came from the field of creative arts and could apply their skills and experience to solving the unique problems the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops faced. Recruits to the Ghost Army 'brains trust' came from such civilian occupations as advertising (a form of deception in itself), architecture, broadcasting (after all, Orson Welles' radio version of HG Wells's *The War of the Worlds* was frighteningly effective in 1938), and theatrical or movie set designers (whose fake constructions had to prove convincing to audiences – even if the audience was the German High Command). The result was the US Army unit with the highest reported collective IQ, with an average rating of 119, that also collectively spoke 29 languages.

THE SOUND EFFECTS DEPICTING FAKE ACTIVITY COULD BE HEARD 15 MILES AWAY

Having drawn up various schemes, it was up to the engineers and regular troops to put them into action, Under the cover of darkness, air compressors were used to inflate 93lb (42kg) dummy tanks that looked convincing from the air (a step up from the timber frame fake tanks deployed in North Africa). The unit's artists would paint the dummy tanks and many other vehicles to either disguise them entirely or to mislead observers into thinking they were something else. The radio specialists broadcast false orders, itemising misleading troop deployments or over-stating by a considerable margin the number of troops deployed in

MILITARY
90-X
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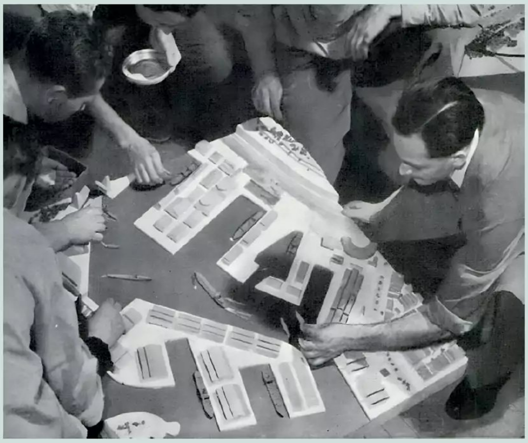
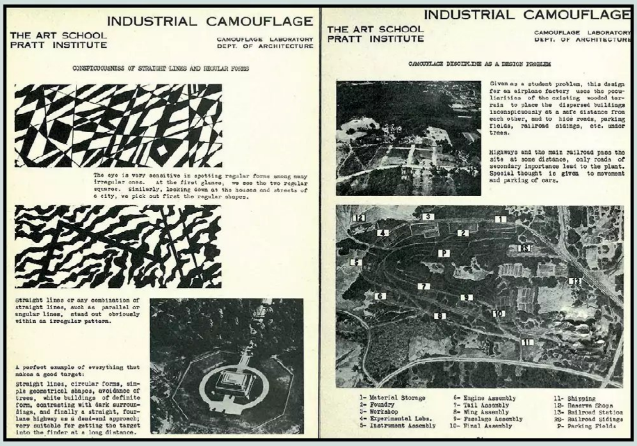
CAMOUFLAGE AND COMICS





INDUSTRIAL CAMOUFLAGE

THE ART SCHOOL
PRATT INSTITUTE

CAMOUFLAGE LABORATORY
DEPT. OF ARCHITECTURE

CONSPICUOUSNESS OF STRAIGHT LINES AND REGULAR FORMS

The eye is very sensitive in spotting regular forms among many irregular ones. At the first glance, we see the two regular squares. Similarly, looking down at the houses and streets of a city, we pick out first the regular shapes.

Straight lines or any combination of straight lines, such as parallel or angular lines, stand out obviously within an irregular pattern.

A perfect example of everything that makes a good target:

Straight lines, circular forms, simple geometrical shapes, avoidance of trees, white buildings of definite form, contrasting with dark surroundings, and finally a straight, four-lane highway as a dead-end approach; very suitable for getting the target into the finder at a long distance.

INDUSTRIAL CAMOUFLAGE

THE ART SCHOOL
PRATT INSTITUTE

CAMOUFLAGE LABORATORY
DEPT. OF ARCHITECTURE

CAMOUFLAGE DISCIPLINE AS A DESIGN PROBLEM

Given as a student problem, this design for an airplane factory uses the peculiarities of the existing wooded terrain to place the dispersed buildings inconspicuously at a safe distance from each other, and to hide roads, parking fields, railroad sidings, etc. under trees.

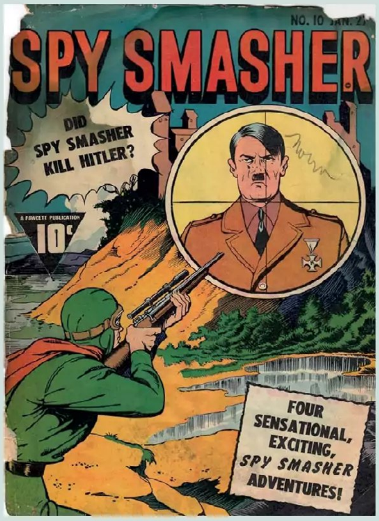
Highways and the main railroad pass the site at some distance, only roads of secondary importance lead to the plant. Special thought is given to movement and parking of cars.

1- Material Storage
2- Foundry
3- Workshop
4- Experimental Labs.
5- Instrument Assembly
6- Engine Assembly
7- Tail Assembly
8- Wing Assembly
9- Fuselage Assembly
10- Final Assembly
11- Shipping
12- Reserve Shops
13- Railroad Station
RS- Railroad Sidings
P- Parking Fields

ABOVE LEFT: Pratt Institute students building a model of a waterfront and dock area to use in their camouflage studies (*Popular Mechanics*, 1942) **ABOVE RIGHT:** Pages from the *Industrial Camouflage Manual* published by the Pratt Institute in 1942. **BELOW:** 'Golden Age' wartime comics featuring such heroes as Spy Smasher and Captain Midnight. **BOTTOM:** Comic artists, including Vic Dowd and Bob Boyajian, at work in 1941 in Jack Binder's home 'studio'.

Many of the artist recruits that ended up in the 23rd Headquarters outfit came direct from New York's Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. James Boudreau, the Institute's Dean, was a pilot and a General in the US Army Reserve. In the early 1940s, with the war well underway in Europe, Boudreau organised what he called an "experimental laboratory" concentrating on research and development in the field of camouflage. He recruited experts and established a formal course. Students would build detailed tabletop models of battlefields in order to figure out ways of hiding military activity from air surveillance. They studied the use of shadow and shape, colour and texture, to deceive, blending them together to mislead the eye and the camera. Boudreau would take his best students out to the Pratt family estate on Long Island's North Shore where they were able to put their ideas into experimental practice. Camouflage netting and other deceptions would be employed, while Boudreau took to the air to photograph his team's best efforts.

Many of Boudreau's boys saw action as part of the 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion Special Unit. A trio of Pratt graduates – Victor Dowd, Ray Harford, and Bob Boyajian – found work at Jack Binder's comic art studio during what would come to be known as the 'Golden Age' of American comics. Among other titles they worked on, these three contributed art to such comic books as *Captain Midnight*, *Bulletman*, and *Spy Smasher*. Later, they all joined up with the 603rd and put some of their comic book imaginings into the service of defeating Hitler's minions. Throughout their deployment these and other artists also recorded the events they were involved in through sketches and paintings, many now regarded as official 'war art'.



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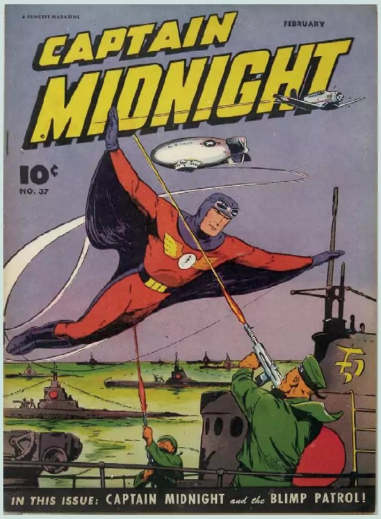
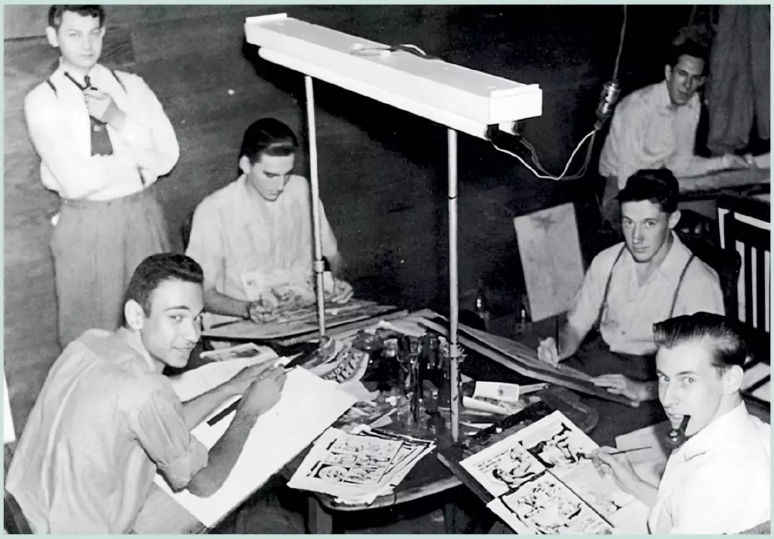




THE WAR MAGICIAN

To Miss
I do hope that I shall be able
to come and stay at your
hotel again
With
Jasper Maskelyne

To Val +
With
love

PIEMAGS/WW2ARCHIVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Jasper Maskelyne, who came from a family of famous magicians, was reputed to have put his skills at the disposal of the British forces during World War II. His grandfather, John Neville Maskelyne, and his father, Neville Maskelyne, had both been stage magicians and prolific inventors of tricks. Having built up his stage skills and trick designing abilities between the wars, Maskelyne joined the Royal Engineers at the start of WWII, hoping his unique talents could help in the war effort.

He joined the Camouflage Development and Training Centre at Farnham Castle in 1940, displaying his skills by effectively disguising a machine gun position in plain sight and achieving the illusion of the German Graf Spee pocket battleship floating down the Thames (as so often, it was all done with mirrors and models). Maskelyne was assigned to the A Force deception squad in Cairo where he developed various techniques to help soldiers in the field, including the hiding of escape tools in a cricket bat, small blades inside otherwise innocuous combs, and the inclusion of helpful micro-maps hidden in playing cards. Later, Maskelyne created the illusion (when seen from aerial surveillance) that the Edgeware de Havilland factory had been destroyed, helping provide cover for British double agent Eddie Chapman. He also supposedly made Alexandria Harbour and the Suez Canal apparently vanish entirely (again using mirrors and misdirection)! Maskelyne's extravagant claims were later questioned by others, and it is possible he was used as a useful 'front man' to distract from the deception activities of others who worked more discreetly behind the scenes.

After the war, Maskelyne returned to the stage touring his magic act throughout Africa, eventually settling in Nairobi where he died in March 1973, aged 70. For more, see **FT149:22** and Gordon Rutter, "Magic Goes to War", **FT185:46-50**).

the field. The sound effects depicting fake troop activity could be heard up to 15 miles (24km) away, further convincing the enemy of their substantial numbers.

In his memoirs of his time in the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops, Captain Fred Fox described the Ghost Army as "more theatrical than military… a travelling road show that went up and down the front lines impersonating the real fighting outfits… few realised that one could spend just as much energy pretending to fight as actually fighting." Only three members of the Ghost Army were killed in action.

The Ghost Army initially assembled in England in the summer of 1944, where most of the planning, training, and experimenting took place. Not everything had to work perfectly in the field of battle, but enough of their schemes had to build up a convincing sense of a much higher degree of military activity than was actually occurring. That would allow the real deployment of the Allied forces to take place elsewhere, hopefully taking the Axis forces by complete surprise.

Perhaps the most successful of the Ghost Army's exploits took place in the run-up to the D-Day Normandy landings of 6 June 1944. A 17-man platoon, consisting of the Ghost Army's most experienced operatives, came ashore as part of the D-Day landing on Omaha Beach. Within a week, they had deployed fake artillery placements that were so convincing they drew the attention of the German military, falling under near constant fire, so providing an effective distraction from the main assault.

The Ghost Army also came to the rescue of General George Patton's 3rd Army during Operation Brittany, between August and October 1944. Taking advantage of weaknesses in the German lines, Patton drove his troops forward heading towards the Moselle River and the dug-in German winter defensive positions. However, this action left a wide gap in Patton's own lines during the attack on Metz in September 1944. While awaiting the deployment of further troops, the Ghost Army were called in to 'fake it' until the US Army could 'make it'. By now well practiced in the art of psychological illusions, the Ghost Army held the line for a week with little more than a handful of their inflatables, the noise of much frantic activity, and even regular call-outs from non-existent sergeants to their troops to put out their telltale lit cigarettes. Radio deceptions helped draw the German army away from Patton's move on the Belgian town of Bastogne, helping the Allies win victory in what became known as the Battle of the Bulge.

Perhaps the Ghost Army's biggest collective efforts came in March 1945 as the US 9th Army set out to cross the Rhine – a fraught undertaking dubbed Operation Viersen. About 10 miles (16km) south of the actual intended crossing point, the Ghost Army was deployed to distract German attention. The task was huge, as it involved a mere handful of men attempting to impersonate two entire Divisions encompassing over 40,000 troops. Scattered radio chatter gave the impression that both the 30th and 79th Divisions were gathering on the banks of the Rhine many miles from where they were actually moving in (under radio silence). Upwards of 600 dummy vehicles projected a mass of troop activity. The sound effect trucks broadcast night and day, suggesting frantic activity as the Allies set about building a giant pontoon to cross the river.

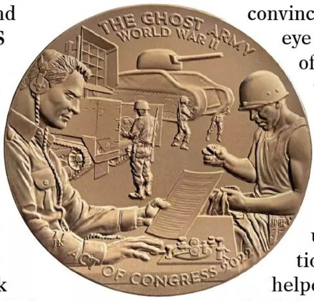
An entire phoney Headquarters set-up and various command posts were created using the flimsiest of materials, staffed by fake Generals and other commanders whose uniforms were covered in patches created by the Ghost Army's finest artists (they put together over 40,000 fake patches). American troops were sent into local villages to populate the bars where they would loudly boast of their activity at the decoy site. It was hoped that any German spies or informers in the local population would pass on the carefully parcelled out disinformation to their commanders. The perfectly conceived

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Ghost Army members John Christman (second from left standing), Seymour Nussenbaum (in wheelchair at left) and Bernard Bluestein (in wheelchair at right), are presented with the Congressional Gold Medal during a ceremony on Capitol Hill on 21 March 2024. **BELOW:** The Medal depicts the four main methods of subterfuge practised by the Ghost Army. A telegrapher is shown keying a message in Morse code together with a soldier sewing a phony unit patch onto his uniform. In the background, a soldier stands alongside a half-track with a loudspeaker attached to it, and a group of soldiers carry an inflatable tank. The reverse design depicts the emblems of the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops and the 3133rd Signal Service Company.

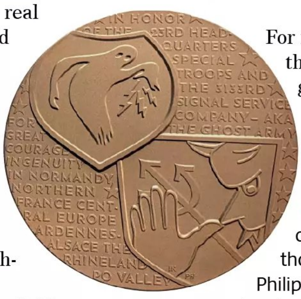
series of deceptions paid off: the Germans concentrated their firepower upon the elusive Ghost Army positions, while further north the US 9th Army crossed the Rhine successfully with little in the way of resistance or attention from the Axis troops.

Although the existence of the Ghost Army was declassified in 1996, it took until early 2024 for those remaining members to be officially recognised and rewarded. In March 2024, US President Biden presented three of the seven survivors, all aged 99-100, with the Gold Congressional Medal. "Rarely, if ever, has there been a group of such a few men which had so great an influence on the outcome of a major military campaign," noted US Army analyst Mark Kronman in a wartime classified report only released many decades after the conflict concluded.



The operatives of the Ghost Army – employing paint brushes, rather than guns – took a decidedly fortean approach to warfare, saving thousands of lives in the process. As well as the German High Command, their target was human perception itself, revealing how easy it can be to produce convincing illusions that trick the eye and the brain. The talents of a diverse group of creatives were employed to deceive and confuse German forces, deflecting their attention from the real areas of Allied activity. Their unconventional thinking helped hasten the defeat of Hitler and bring an end to the war. The psychological warfare techniques pioneered by the Ghost Army continued throughout the Cold War and are still in use today in a very different field: social media and online misinformation and propaganda. As magician and escapologist Harry Houdini once said: "What the eyes see and the ears hear, the mind believes…" The army-that-never-was is, in many ways, still with us…

> **THE GHOST ARMY TOOK A DECIDEDLY FORTEAN APPROACH TO WARFARE**


IN HONOR OF THE 23RD HEADQUARTERS SPECIAL TROOPS AND THE 3133RD SIGNAL SERVICE COMPANY – AKA THE GHOST ARMY
FOR GREAT COURAGE INGENUITY IN NORMANDY NORTHERN FRANCE CENTRAL EUROPE ARDENNES-ALSACE THE RHINELAND PO VALLEY

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For more information about the Ghost Army, visit https://ghostarmy.com/ and the site of the Ghost Army Legacy Project at https://ghostarmy.org

BRIAN J ROBB is a regular contributor to FT and the author of books on silent cinema, Philip K Dick, the Star Wars movies and Walt Disney and an illustrated guide to Tolkien's Middle-earth. He is a Founding Editor of the Sci-Fi Bulletin website and lives in Edinburgh.

Ghosts at Goblin Hill

ROB GANDY uncovers the haunted history of one of Staffordshire's great country estates and finds witness testimony concerning many a modern apparition – as well as an unexpected link with the legendary Middle-earth of JRR Tolkien

SIAN VICTORIA / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Shugborough Hall is a National Trust country house located in Milford, six miles east of Stafford on the A513.[1] Originally there was a moated mediæval palace here belonging to the bishops of Lichfield, but this was bought by a successful lawyer named William Anson in 1624, who adapted the palace ruins to create a new manor house.

However, in 1693 his grandson (another William) demolished it and replaced it with a modest three-storey country house that forms the core of the current building. It was enlarged from 1745 into an impressive Georgian mansion by adding a pair of neo-classical pavilions to flank the central block. George Anson, great-grandson of the first William, rose to become First Lord of the Admiralty, and in the 1740s captured a Spanish ship laden with £400,000 of treasure, while circumnavigating the world. This was one of the largest treasures ever seized by an English sea captain, and some of it was used to extend the Shugborough estates.

When George died heirless in 1762 his brother Thomas inherited the estate and had the means to introduce Roman and Greek elements to the house interiors, with elaborate plasterwork in rococo style, fine furniture and artwork. Outside, classical monuments were built in the grounds, such as a Doric Temple, Temple of the Winds, Dark Lantern, Shepherd's Monument, Chinese House, and Hadrian's Arch.[2] Further developments took place over the years, but then Anson's descendant, the 1st Earl of Lichfield, lost most of the family fortune due to his profligate lifestyle, excessive gambling and lavish entertaining, and in 1842 all the contents of the mansion were sold at auction. The 2nd and 3rd Earls started to refill the family coffers, with the 4th Earl opening Shugborough to the public.

Upon his death, the entire estate was offered to the National Trust. Nevertheless, arrangements were made for Shugborough to continue as the home of the Earls of Lichfield, with Patrick Lichfield (the 5th Earl, celebrated photographer and cousin to the Queen) living there in a retained wing with its own entrance until he passed away in 2005. Since then the whole of the estate has been with the National Trust.

As would be expected of a stately home, ghosts are said to haunt Shugborough

SHUGBOROUGH GHOSTS

As would be expected of a stately home, there are supposed to be ghosts that haunt Shugborough. Three are generally mentioned: Lady Harriet died in childbirth in the state bedroom and her ghost is supposed to haunt this room, which is well known for its chill and uncanny atmosphere; a former housekeeper is said to haunt the kitchens, with staff having heard the rustle of her skirts and seen her figure pass by windows; and finally, Admiral Anson passes through the building slamming doors.[3]

Arguably, these tales represent standard spectral fare without much hard evidence behind them. However, my very good fortean friend David Adams told me about one occasion when he was with Patrick Lichfield at Shugborough. It was evening, and while chatting with his host over a glass or two of whisky it was perhaps inevitable that David would touch on the subject of ghosts given his interest in all things strange. He says that Patrick told him that his original bedroom in Shugborough had two doors and that "often" he would hear footsteps approaching along the corridor and then one door would open. The steps would continue across the room to the other door, when that door would open as well. (David cannot remember if Patrick indicated whether the doors also

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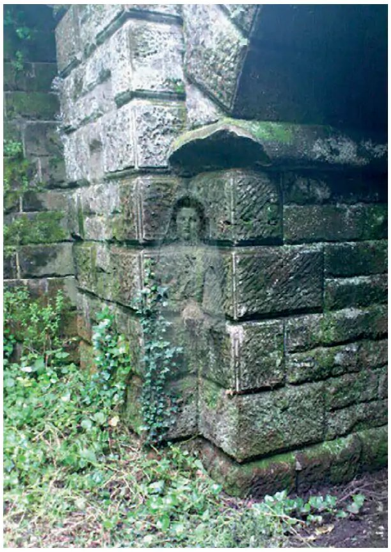


LEFT: Patrick Lichfield at home at Shugborough. **ABOVE:** The strange photograph of ‘Emily’ taken by ‘Steve’. **BELOW:** The ‘State Bedroom’ in which Lady Harriet died in childbirth; her ghost is said to haunt the room.

closed – or slammed, as per Admiral Anson). Patrick was not disturbed or frightened by this phenomenon and considered it to be a normal part of life. He added that most royal residences had ghosts and the family just treated them as part of the history of the buildings.

So here we have first-hand testimony from the 5th Earl of Lichfield that Shugborough is haunted! Alan Murdie, of the *Ghost Club*, kindly checked his files for me but could not offer further good evidence of hauntings; and so it was agreed that the best way forward was to make enquiries as to whether more people in the area (particularly staff) might have had related experiences. Fortunately I have a local contact who happily agreed to investigate on my behalf. Regular readers may recollect that my article “Brides, Bridges and Spacemen”(**FT389:42-47**) involved the regular sighting of a ghost on the Essex Bridge which links Shugborough Hall to Great Haywood across the River Trent. ‘Karen’, who lives in Great Haywood, had arranged for me to receive an account from her friend ‘Steve’ about his encounter which included him taking a photograph of an open space where he sensed a presence. When he later looked at the photograph there was an image of a young woman, who he named ‘Emily’. I got in touch with Karen and asked her if she might be prepared to make appropriate enquiries. This she did, which included local Facebook groups, and set out below are the details of the testimonies that she received.

> We have first-hand testimony from the 5th Earl of Lichfield that Shugborough Hall is haunted...

DADEROT / CREATIVE COMMONS

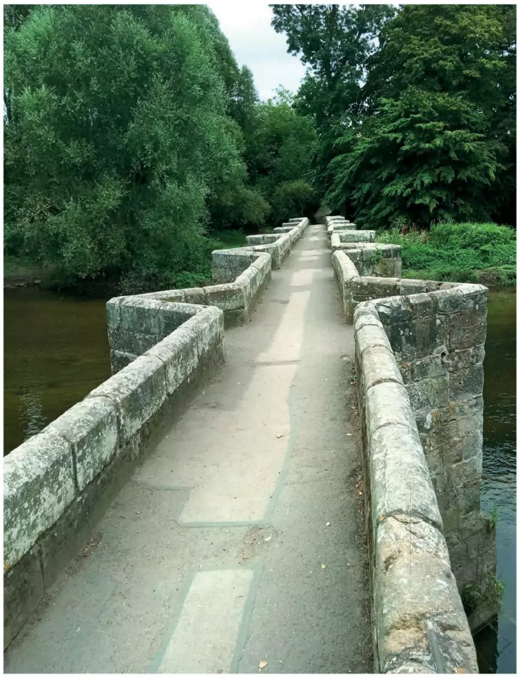
LADY HARRIET’S GHOST?

Julie Looker often visited Shugborough Hall when her mother worked there, because she could get in for free. On one occasion in the spring or summer of 1987 (or perhaps 1988) she was with her husband in Lady Harriet’ s bedroom, one of the few rooms people could enter. It was probably towards lunchtime and the room was full of children on a visit from a primary school. A very uncomfortable feeling of dread came over her and she couldn’t wait to leave the room; it was as if someone or something hateful didn’t want her there. (Her husband did not sense anything). However, when she went back a while later, after the children had left, she was fine. This puzzled her because she had been in the room many times before with no problems. Julie later found out that Lady Harriet had died in childbirth in that room, and she wonders if whoever or whatever she felt was there didn’t want the children around, rather than the sensations being directed at her alone.

HAUNTED BY THE HOUSEKEEPER?

It was during the 1980s that YW worked at Shugborough Hall. She loved it and always felt safe, even at night events which involved walking from the café to the house in the dark. It was at one event that she was taking items to the house using the cellar, which was just a long corridor where items were stored. She had been backwards and forwards quite a few times with no trouble when, coming down the steps from the house into the cellar, she felt someone was following her. When she was halfway along the cellar the feeling left her and she looked back, but there was no one there. She mentioned her experience to a colleague and they told her that halfway along the cellar there used to be a turn-off to the right; this was evidenced by brickwork suggesting there had once been a door there, which would have led to either another room or corridor. (It should be borne in mind that Shugborough Hall has experienced demolitions, rebuilds and remodelling over the centuries, and therefore some of the floor plans will have changed).

YW never experienced this again, but she is convinced that someone, or something, was following her. Perhaps it was the ghost of a maid or possibly even that of the legend-


ROB GANDY

CHRIS ALLEN / GEOGRAPH.OR

DAVID DIXON / GEOGRAPH.ORG

ABOVE LEFT: The Essex Bridge linking Shugborough Hall to Great Haywood, where a phantom figure has been reported. **TOP RIGHT:** The kitchens at Shugborough, said to be haunted by a former housekeeper. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The gates to the estate, where 'SW' and her partner saw a pair of vanishing ladies in black.

ary housekeeper said to haunt the hall? She added that there is also a 'cold spot' in Swallow Passage, which is between two downstairs rooms.

THE MAN IN THE BREECHES

One mild and sunny Monday afternoon sometime in early September 2020, around 4.30 to 5pm, Eve was walking alone on the bridle path when she saw a man in his late-60s wearing breeches that came to his knees, dark shoes, a dark jacket and a hat. The man, who was around 5ft 6in (1.68m) in height, clean-shaven and with short fair or grey hair, politely said 'Hello' to her as he passed. Eve thought that he seemed "a bit of a character", and chuckled to herself. She thought no more of it until she stopped a few paces later to look at some cows. She looked back and realised that the man had disappeared. Yet there was nowhere he could have gone, other than through the main gate – but this was locked. She looked all around but she could not see him anywhere.

TWO LADIES IN BLACK

SW moved to Great Haywood in early 2013, although her partner is native to the village. One warm and sunny weekday in early June 2016, the two of them decided to go for a quiet lunchtime walk before their children returned from school. They set off, chatting about how everything looked bright and beautiful around Essex Bridge and the River Trent on sunny days. Their route towards the Shugborough Hall entrance took them across Essex Bridge, where they stopped just over halfway across to admire the river for a minute, before carrying on. As they approached the last quarter end of the bridge, SW noticed two ladies walking towards the entrance gates from the long bridle path, which cuts through the middle of the estate.

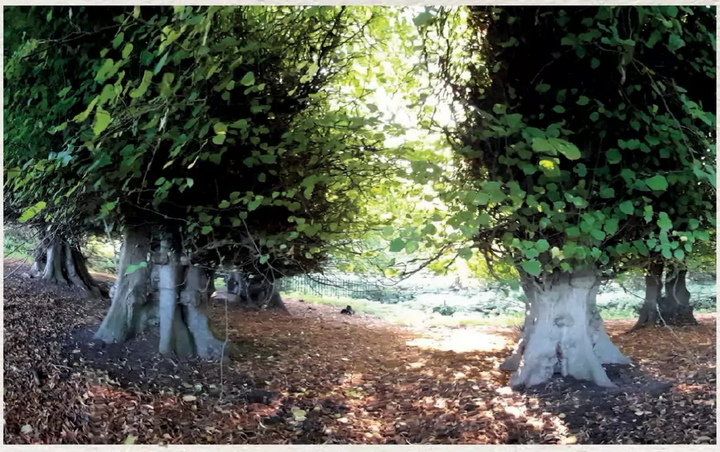
The first lady looked between 60 and 70 years of age, and had blonde, permed, bobbed hair. She was wearing a black cardigan with a black pleated skirt which came halfway down her lower legs, and black loafer-style shoes. The second woman was middle-aged, probably between 35 and 45 years old, with long brown hair, tied-back. She was also dressed all in black, wearing a long-sleeved top, straight black trousers and similar black shoes to those worn by her companion. They proceeded to walk through the gates, which are next to the lodge keeper's cottage and only half a minute from where SW and her partner were standing. But when they themselves approached these gates, they found they were not only shut but actually padlocked. SW looked at her partner in confusion and asked him how the two women could have got through the locked gates. He too was confused and shrugged his shoulders. SW immediately looked into the wooded area opposite the Shugborough grounds, but no one was there. They both looked through the gates into the Shugborough grounds, but there was no sign of either of the two women.

At a loss, they carried on up the bridle path towards the football pitches, with SW frequently looking behind to see if she could see any sign of the two ladies, but to no avail. It was as if the women had walked to the gates and then vanished into thin air. SW and her partner tried to rationalise the incident as they continued their walk: the women could not have climbed over the gates, as there was insufficient time to do so, and then disappear from sight; furthermore, the elderly lady didn't look capable of climbing. They also would not have been able to go back down the bridle path unobserved, as that was too open; and they didn't walk across the Essex Bridge or go down to the riverbank, because SW and her partner would have clearly seen them. Nothing similar has happened to SW and her partner since the incident, and to this day they have no explanation for what they witnessed.

THE MEN ON THE TOW PATH

One summer in the mid-2000s Sue Mortimer and her husband John had a weird experience close to the Shugborough estate while walking along the towpath, which is on the western side of the canal, on their way towards Shugborough from Colwich church. It was around midday, and they were walking a neighbour's dog. As they approached Little Haywood bridge on Meadow Lane they saw some strangely dressed people crossing the bridge, and by the time they walked under the bridge the group were ahead of them on the tow path. The leading man was dressed in a hat and long coat, clothes that looked almost Jewish in style, yet he was chanting 'Hail Marys', with the three or four other men joining in.[4] Given the pleasant weather, Sue and John thought it curious that all of the men were very heavily dressed and wondered out loud whether the men had all been to a funeral. Intriguingly, as Sue, John and the dog overtook the group, none of the men reacted to their presence. When they reached the bend in the tow path Sue couldn't resist looking back at the group – but they were nowhere to be seen! This seemed impossible, as the men would have had to have run quite fast to have gone back to the bridge and disappear from view in such

Rings and Hobbits: Tolkien in Staffordshire



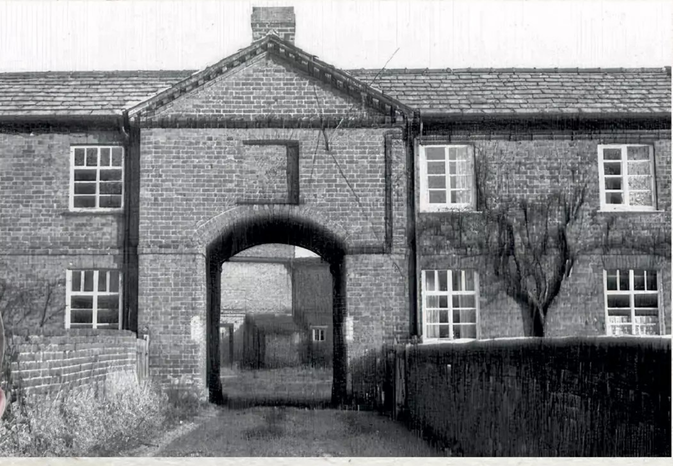
ROB GANDY

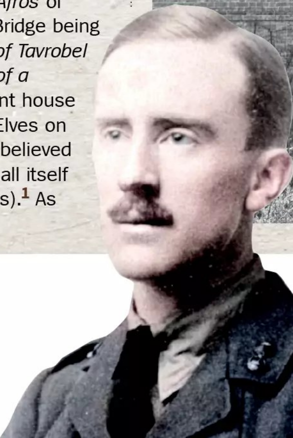
ABOVE LEFT: Rock Cottage, Great Haywood, where Tolkien lived in 1916. **ABOVE RIGHT**: A ring of stumpy trees at The Cliffs – perfect for hobbits. **BELOW**: The circle of joined cottages known as 'The Ring', which stood opposite The Cliffs from 1810 to 1965. **BELOW LEFT**: JRR Tolkien photographed in 1916.

Does the name *'Shugborough'* mean *'goblin hill'*? Well, maybe it is pure coincidence that someone who knew and wrote a lot about goblins (and elves, dwarves and hobbits) lived in Great Haywood. This was none other than JRR Tolkien. As a soldier with the Lancashire Fusiliers in World War I Tolkien was stationed in various parts of Staffordshire, including the Brocton Camp on Cannock Chase. Following their marriage in early 1916, his wife Edith moved to Great Haywood to be close to him, and he regularly visited her until his posting to France in June of that year. He served at the Battle of the Somme, but returned to Great Haywood in December to recuperate from trench fever, a typhus-like infection.

It was at Rock Cottage, on Main Road, that Tolkien wrote *The Cottage of Lost Play* and *The Fall of Gondolin*, the first two stories in what would eventually be published after his death as *The Book of Lost Tales*, essentially an early version of *The Silmarillion.* There, he undoubtedly used the topography of the local landscape to inform his developing mythical world. Christopher Tolkien, his son and literary executor, says the village of *Tavrobel* is based on Great Haywood. Examples include the confluence of the Rivers Sow and Trent becoming where the *Rivers Gruir and Afros* of Middle-earth meet, and Essex Bridge being referred to as *The Grey Bridge of Tavrobel* in a related ballad. *The House of a Hundred Chimneys* is the ancient house of *Gilganon*, one of the oldest Elves on *Tol Eressëa*, in *Tavrobel,* and is believed to be based on Shugborough Hall itself (which actually has 80 chimneys).[1] As a place where lore and memories were preserved, *Tavrobel* can be seen as a precursor in Tolkien's imagination for *Rivendell*, the house of *Elrond*.

Immediately across the road from the cottage is an area of land on the Shugborough estate known as The Cliffs, which is now used for grazing animals and has a wall running alongside it. Locals go for walks there and say how the views from The Cliffs, which look down over the Shugborough Estate with Cannock Chase in the background, could well have inspired Middle-earth. They point out two groups of trees laid out in a circle, with thicket growing underneath their branches and in between their gnarled roots, which make them appear quite short and stumpy. You would have to be about three feet tall (or a hobbit) to walk underneath them, apparently! In addition, there are large mounds and many large old oak trees and horse chestnuts. Other local features include the small Cliff Quarry where sandstone was mined to build the local convent. It has a 30ft (9m) high cliff and some small caves.[2] You can readily imagine Tolkien wandering the pathways across The Cliffs to build up his strength and absorb the surrounding features and vistas. Even if he never actually visited Shugborough Hall itself, it is likely he saw the many blazing fires through the windows as he walked along adjacent public footpaths. Interestingly, only a few hundred yards up from Rock Cottage along Main Road, and right opposite The Cliffs, stood a circle of joined cottages which was constructed in 1810. It housed many of the people who had lived in the village on the Shugborough estate, which had gone by





then. The doors of the cottages opened onto an inner courtyard, which had a communal oven in its centre, and one of the buildings was used as a school for the children of the village. Its name? 'The Ring'. [3] Perhaps this was just coincidence, or maybe the name served to inspire Tolkien's greatest works?

After his extended convalescence in Great Haywood, Tolkien was posted to a hospital in Harrogate, Yorkshire, in late February 1917, with Edith following him. A year later they returned to Staffordshire when Tolkien was posted back to Cannock Chase. They did not go back to Great Haywood, but moved to nearby Penkridge with their new-born son John.

The local area celebrates its connection with Tolkien – as do many other places – with festivals, exhibitions and organised walks. Indeed, there is a Staffordshire Tolkien Trail which involves "three circular walks in the footsteps of JRR. Tolkien" and covers over 30 miles (48km) of the Staffordshire countryside on and around Cannock Chase.[4]

As mentioned above, a protagonist in *The Book of Lost Tales* is *Gilganon* who is an elf rather than a goblin. But might it be that Tolkien was aware that *Shugborough* could mean *'goblin hill'*, and that this partly prompted his train of thought? Clearly, if he wanted a sympathetic character for the story then it made more sense for it to be an elf – a supernatural being with magical powers – rather than a goblin, which traditionally is a small ugly malevolent creature. We will never know if this was the case; but perhaps there is something about Shugborough and its surrounding area that connects whatever is behind the strange experiences described in my article and the great author's metaphysical thinking... or am I just Tolkien rubbish?

My thanks to 'Karen' for highlighting Tolkien's link to Great Haywood, providing the local perspective and photographs.

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1 www.tolkiensociety.org/events/j-r-r-tolkien-in-staffordshire-exhibition/; www.bbc.co.uk/stoke/features/2003/01/tolkien.shtml

2 www.search.staffspasttrack.org.uk/Details.aspx?&ResourceID=1652&PageIndex=4&SearchType=2&ThemeID=280

3 The Ring was demolished in 1965, and replaced with a cul-de-sac of modern bungalows, with the road retaining the name 'The Ring'. The original buildings were the work of Samuel Wyatt, who also designed the Stafford and Lichfield Lodges. Perhaps Tolkien naming one of the hobbits as Samwise 'Sam' Gamgee was a nod to him? See: www.search.staffspasttrack.org.uk/Details.aspx?&ResourceID=1461&PageIndex=92&SearchType=2&ThemeID=235

4 www.staffordshire.gov.uk/Libraries/Library-services/localfamilyhistory/Tolkien-Trail-booklet-Revised-2nd-Edition-2017.pdf

ABOVE: Shugborough's 400-year-old great yew tree gets a trim.

PA IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

a short amount of time; and why would they have done so? Also, there was nowhere for them to have gone either side of the tow path. Sue and John described this puzzling event to several people over the years but always received a sceptical reaction; but they know what happened and cannot explain it, making them wonder if they had seen some sort of ghosts.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The experiences described above embrace both Shugborough Hall and the surrounding area. None of those reported inside the hall actually involved the sighting of anything specific – phenomena were heard or sensed. By contrast, those in the adjacent area all involved apparently 'real' people who simply suddenly disappeared, to the consternation of the witnesses. Indeed, in two cases these 'real' people actually spoke or chanted! Such phenomena seem to have more in common with time slips than what might be considered 'traditional' ghosts; but then how would anyone necessarily be able to distinguish one from the other?

But maybe there is something in the land and the area itself that is at play? Toponymists will have already spotted that the name *Shugborough* derives from the Old English word *scucca*, meaning goblin or demon, and *burgh* meaning hill or ancient earthwork. Combining these, the place means *'hill or mound haunted by an evil spirit'*, or maybe *'goblin hill'*.[5] The National Trust has confirmed that historically there was a Shugborough village and that there has been evidence of Bronze Age occupation, with the possibility that there was a barrow or fortification in this period.[6] It is worth noting that within the hall's boundaries sits the Shugborough Yew Tree, reputedly England's widest;[7] and yew trees have long had mythological and folkloric reputations.[8] Certainly, the estate is not too far from Cannock Chase, which is famous for its weirdness, including werewolves, pig-men, UFOs and other phenomena (see **FT306:70-72, 416:5, 417:29, 455:18-20**). Therefore, irrespective of whether Shugborough *was* viewed as a location haunted by goblins and demons in ancient times, there is no denying that the area around the hall seems to be something of a locus for strange phenomena here in the 21st century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to David Adams, Alan Murdie and 'Karen' for their time, help and advice.

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2 www.britainexpress.com/attractions.htm?attraction=3698

3 www.bbc.co.uk/stoke/content/articles/2005/09/07/stafford_haunted_places_feature.shtml

4 There was a Jewish presence in Great Haywood and North Staffordshire (at least) from the mid-19th century, when 28-year old Casimir Goldberg from Warsaw ran a small brewery in the village. See: www.jstor.org/stable/29780124

5 https://lichfieldlore.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/397633_vol2.pdf; www.houseofnames.com/shugborough-family-crest

6 Personal communication by email, 19 Feb 2021. The response to my enquiry also confirmed that the National Trust was not aware of any connection between the historic village and the Shugborough family that lived in Warwickshire in Upper Shuckburgh. It would seem that the names being the same is purely coincidence

7 https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1001167

8 https://treesforlife.org.uk/into-the-forest/trees-plants-animals/trees/yew/

ROB GANDY is a Retired Visiting Professor at Liverpool John Moores University and a regular contributor to *Fortean Times*, where he writes about timeslips, phantom hitchhikers and football curses.

The Legend of the Robber's Grave

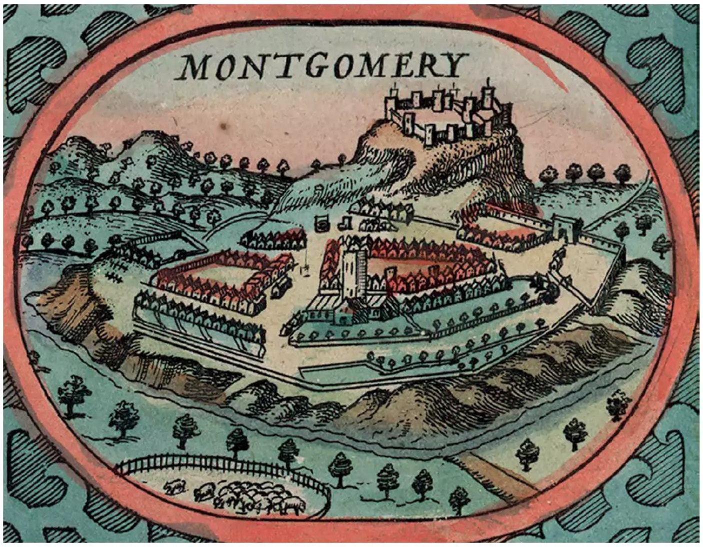
JAN BONDESON travels to the historic town of Montgomery in the Welsh Marches in search of the truth behind a popular legend concerning an executed robber, a weird weather event and a curse uttered from the scaffold...

Low in the churchyard, green and fair, where leaves and blossoms wave
Is shown a strip of barren earth, 'tis called the 'Robber's Grave'
From other graves it lies remote, no turfy mound is near;
No letter'd stone is there to tell the sadly-closed career.
Old Poet

The peaceful old town of Mongomery, Powys, is situated in the Welsh Marches. Its main historical claims to fame are the signature of the Treaty of Montgomery in 1267, and the sackings of the town by Owain Glyndwr and later by English parliamentary forces. As the county town of the old county of Montgomeryshire, it flourished for some time, with its historic 13th century church and its long since ruined castle.

As indicated by the Edwardian postcard reproduced here, the main fortean attraction in Montgomery is a grave in the parish churchyard, connected with a story so extraordinary that its like has yet to be told. According to this tradition, a man named John Newton (or perhaps Davies), was convicted of highway robbery and hanged at Montgomery in 1821. On the scaffold, he solemnly promised that to mark his innocence of the crime, no grass would grow upon his grave.

After Newton had been executed, there was a terrible downpour, with a fearful darkness spreading and much thunder and lightning. As Newton/Davies had predicted, no grass grew on his grave for many years to come.



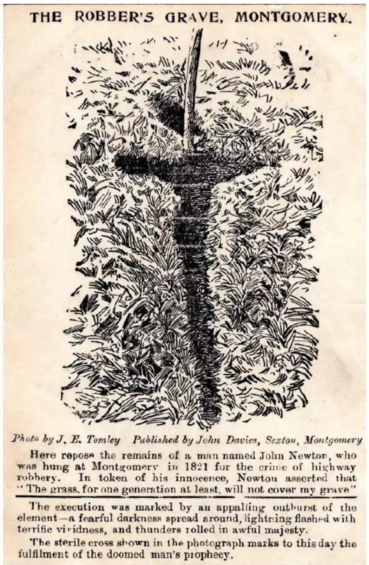

THE ROBBER'S GRAVE, MONTGOMERY.

Photo by J. E. Tomley *Published by John Davies, Sexton, Montgomery*

Here repose the remains of a man named John Newton, who was hung at Montgomery in 1821 for the crime of highway robbery. In token of his innocence, Newton asserted that "The grass, for one generation at least, will not cover my grave"

The execution was marked by an appalling outburst of the element—a fearful darkness spread around, lightning flashed with terrific vividness, and thunders rolled in awful majesty.

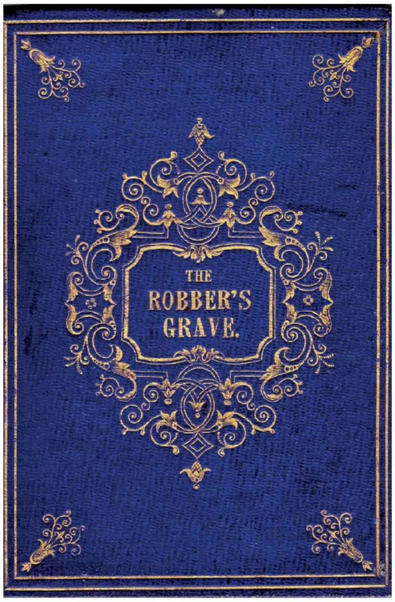
The sterile cross shown in the photograph marks to this day the fulfilment of the doomed man's prophecy.

LEFT: Montgomery, from John Speed's *County Maps of Wales*, first published in 1610. **BELOW LEFT:** The postcard telling the tale of the Robber's Grave.

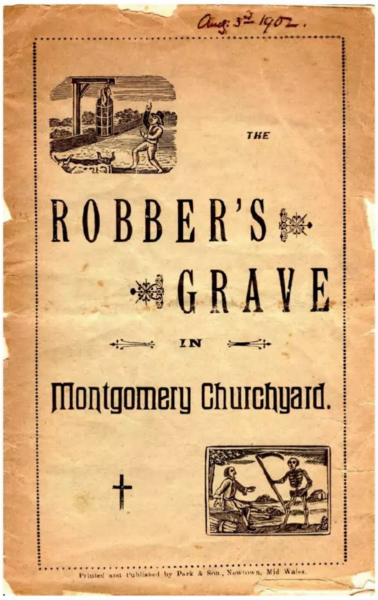
THE ACCOUNT OF MR MOSTYN PRYCE

R Mostyn Pryce was an obscure Welshman who flourished in Victorian times; his only published book remains *The Robber's Grave* from 1852, a very slender volume first published by Park & Son in Newtown. The second edition in 1853 was published by the London firm of John Olliver, of 59 Pall Mall. The book was hardly a bestseller, but one copy of the 1853 second edition survives in the National Library of Wales and I have a dedicated copy of the 31-page second edition. An antiquary has identified the author as the Reverend Richard Henry Mostyn Pryce of Gunley, once Vicar of Trelystan and the head of an old Powys family. His career was ended in March 1858, when he cut his throat with great violence when visiting a barber's shop in Newtown.

As the primary account of the Robber's Grave, written just 31 years after the alleged execution and burial, Mostyn Pryce's book is well worthy of analysis. It begins with an Introduction briefly telling the tale of the Robber's Grave, stating that numerous attempts have been made, by some who are still alive, to promote the growth of grass on the grave, but all in vain. Of late, the surrounding grass had



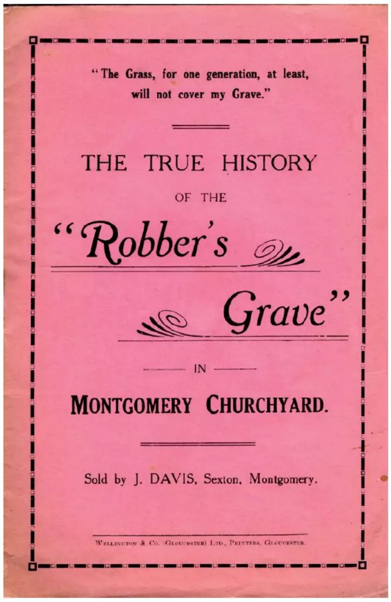
THE
ROBBER'S
GRAVE.



Aug: 3rd 1902.

THE
ROBBER'S
GRAVE
IN
Montgomery Churchyard.

Printed and Published by Park & Son., Newtown, Mid Wales.



"The Grass, for one generation, at least,
will not cover my Grave."

THE TRUE HISTORY
OF THE
"Robber's
Grave"
IN
MONTGOMERY CHURCHYARD.

Sold by J. DAVIS, Sexton, Montgomery.

Wellington & Co. (Gloucester) Ltd., Printers, Gloucester.

ABOVE: The cover of the 1853 edition of Mr Mostyn Pryce's book; the titlepage of the 1895 Newtown reprint, inscribed in 1902; and the titlepage of a later abridged reprint of the Mostyn Pryce pamphlet.

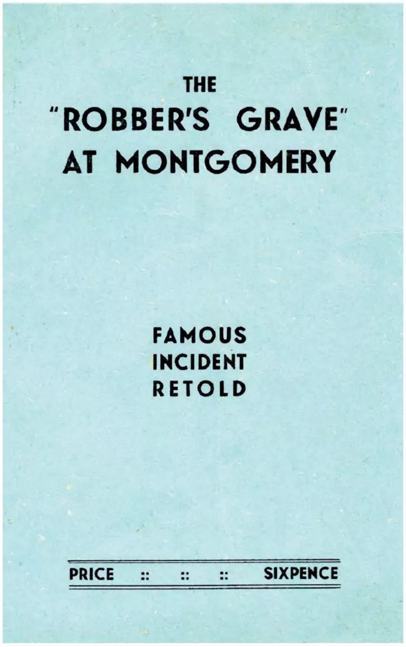
somewhat encroached upon the patch of bare earth, but the original coffin shape still remained.

Mostyn Pryce next introduces the two villains of the piece: the sturdy countryman Thomas Pearce and his friend Robert Parker. They go to visit a manor house named Oakfield, formerly owned by Pearce's ancestors, but now inhabited by the widow of a dissolute man named Morris and her daughter Jane. Mrs Morris employs a young Staffordshire man named John Newton as a bailiff to look after her affairs at Oakfield. With time, the amorous widow became quite fond of Newton, although he preferred the daughter Jane.

> **To mark his innocence of the crime, no grass would grow upon his grave**

The two villains, Pearce and Parker, conspired against the outsider Newton, who was looking after Oakfield, the house Pearce considered part of his family's estate.

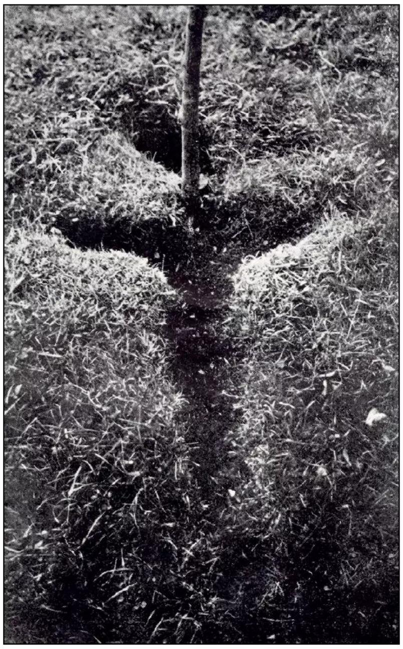
Nourishing a strong hatred against the out-of-towner Newton and his presumed designs on the house, the two villains go to the magistrate to give false information against him for highway robbery. Since Pearce and Parker are considered reliable witnesses, Newton was tried, without any counsel for the defence, found guilty, condemned and hanged. When they see that no grass grows on his grave, Pearce and Parker realise that they are labour-

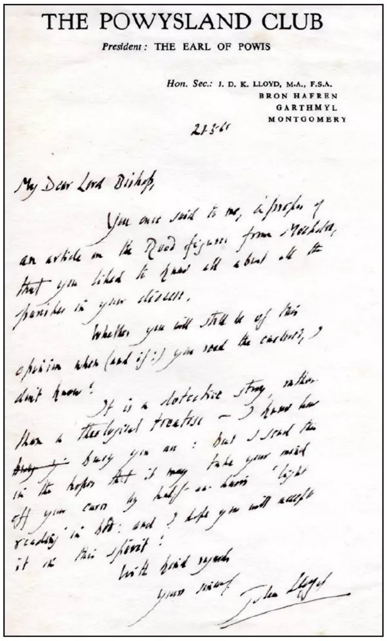


THE
"ROBBER'S GRAVE"
AT MONTGOMERY

FAMOUS
INCIDENT
RETOLD

PRICE :: :: :: SIXPENCE





THE POWYSLAND CLUB
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BRON HAFREN
GARTHMYL
MONTGOMERY

21-3-61

My Dear Lord Bishop,

You once said to me, à propos of an article on the Rood figures from Mochdre, that you liked to know all about all the parishes in your diocese.

Whether you will still be of this opinion when (and if!) you read the enclosed, I don't know!

It is a detective story, rather than a theological treatise – I know how ~~[illegible]~~ busy you are: but I send the in the hope that it may take your mind off your cares by half-an-hour's 'light reading' in bed: and I hope you will accept it in this spirit!

With kind regards
Yours sincerely
John Lloyd

ABOVE LEFT: The 1945 pamphlet containing the narrative of Mary Jones. **ABOVE:** A 1959 photograph of the Robber's Grave, from Mr Lloyd's 1959 paper in the Montgomeryshire Collections, of which he donated a reprint to the Bishop of St Asaph, now in my possession, see the letter shown above right.

NATIONAL CHURCHES TRUST

LEFT: The church of St Nicholas, Montgomery. **BELOW:** Mr Lloyd's brief pamphlet on the case, for sale in the church for many years.

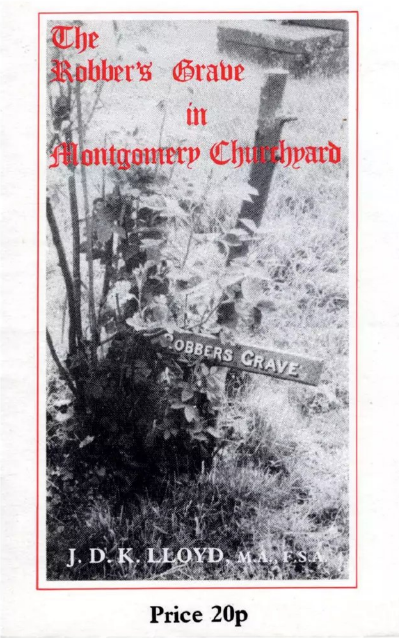
ing under a curse. Pearce becomes very dispirited, tormented by thoughts about his perjurious past. Parker takes to drink and becomes quite dissolute, before being blown up while blasting some rocks in a lime works. The Widow Morris and young Jane leave the district, never to return. Thus Mostyn Pryce's account is really a short pseudo-historical novella populated with invented characters, roughly inspired by the Legend of the Robber's grave, but abounding with invented dialogue and impressive feats of thought-reading. For many years, it would remain the only text about the Legend of the Robber's Grave. In 1860, it was featured by the *Dublin University Magazine*, and later by the *Manchester Times*. There were cheap Newtown reprints of the pamphlet in 1895 and 1907.

THE NARRATIVE OF MARY JONES

Mary Jones was an elderly Welsh woman living in Montgomery. Her family, the Evanses of 'The Pwll', were well known locally. When visited by an antiquary in the 1930s, when she was nearly 90 years old, Mary Jones told various yarns from her long life but did not mention the Robber's Grave. She was later befriended by Mr JE Tomley CBE, who took down her narrative of the Robber's Grave in writing. The well-known Montgomery farmer, Mr David Richard Evans of The Pwll (1803-1882), was the father of Mary Jones. He had been 18 years old when he personally saw the execution of the Robber, and witnessed the astounding meteorological phenomena that followed. He had many times seen the Robber's Grave and could attest that no grass had grown upon it.

Mary Jones had, of course, read the Mostyn Pryce pamphlet, which she relied upon as being largely truthful, although some of the names had been changed.

There was "a tremendous storm of rain, with thunder and lightning"



The Robber's Grave in Montgomery Churchyard

J. D. K. LLOYD, M.A., F.S.A.

Price 20p

Importantly, the executed robber was not named John Newton, but John Davies from Oswestry. The man who had been robbed of his purse and his watch and chain was identified as William Jones. John Davies may well have been an innocent man, falsely accused by the villain Pearce and his unnamed companion.

Mary Jones, described as the last surviving daughter of David Richard Evans, expired in 1937 at the age of 90, but her narrative, as recorded by Mr Tomley, survived her. He wanted to publish extracts in the *Montgomery County Times*, but in the end had a short pamphlet published by this newspaper at Welshpool. Giving the narrative of Mary Jones in full, as well as some of the researches of Mr Tomley himself, including this extract from the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* of August 31, 1821:

"Montgomeryshire Assizes commenced at Welshpool yesterday week – John Davies, for stopping Mr William Jones on the highway and robbing him of a watch and chain and some money had sentence of death passed upon him."

THE INVESTIGATION OF MR JDK LLOYD

Mr JDK Lloyd MA FSA was one of several local antiquaries who took an interest in the Legend of the Robber's Grave. He tracked down a copy of the 1852 edition of Mostyn Pryce's pamphlet and read it with interest. It was obvious to him that he was reading a novel, however, with plentiful invented dialogue and detailed accounts of the mental processes of the characters. Mr Lloyd concluded that had Mostyn Pryce's pamphlet been the only source for the legend of the Robber's Grave, the old tradition must be an invention. Mr Lloyd had visited Mary Jones in the 1930s, but although the ancient woman spoke at length about her experiences, she did not mention the Robber's Grave. Instead, Mr Lloyd spoke to another 'oldest resident' named Robert Owen, who had heard a story that the Robber 'Newton', whose real name had been John Davies, had got into a quarrel with two men travelling along the road from Welshpool to Forden and Montgomery. As 'Newton' had fought one of them, near the Kilkewydd bridge, the other man had put his own watch into the pocket of the alleged thief, before giving information against him as a highway robber.

When looking through the relevant files of the *Salopian Journal* at the Shrewsbury Borough Library, Mr Lloyd found the following important note:

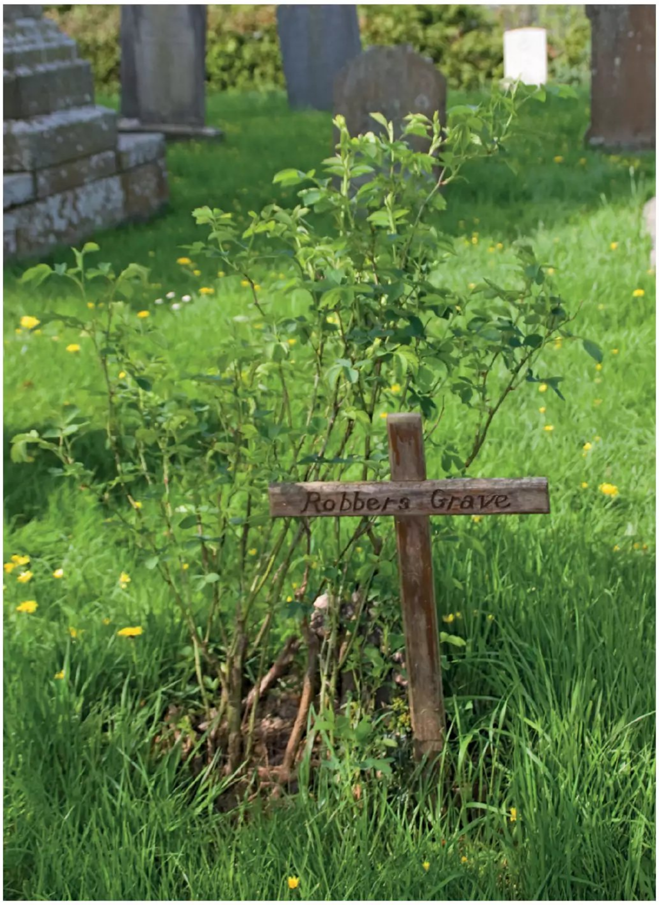
"The Great Sessions for Montgomeryshire commenced at Welshpool on Thursday last. John Davies for stopping William Jones on the highway and robbing him of a watch and some money, was found guilty, and had sentence of DEATH passed upon him in a very solemn and impressive manner."

He also found a brief account of the execution:

"On Thursday last, John Davies was executed at Montgomery, pursuant to his sentence at the late Assizes for that county, for robbing Mr Jones on the highway."

Nothing was mentioned about the curse of the man to be executed, his promise that no grass would grow on his grave, or the meteorological phenomena that were witnessed by the father of Mary Jones and other spectators. But in the 'Harvest and the Weather' column of the same newspaper, he read that on the very day John Davies was executed, there was "a tremendous storm of rain, with thunder and lightning…"

During his long and careful investigation of the Legend of the Robber's Grave, Mr Lloyd had uncovered much to support the veracity of the narrative of Mary Jones, in particular the Robber's name, John Davies, said to have been a plasterer and slater, born in Wrexham but lately employed in Oswestry. There was nothing to support the existence of the villain Pearce, or his companion 'Parker', or the story, invented by Mostyn Pryce, that these two had informed against the Robber for self-seeking motives. Instead, there was the possibility that the alleged victim, William Jones, had informed against John Davies after a fight. Mr Lloyd went to the Public Record Office in London, where the Gaol Files were still held. He could identify the prosecutor, William Jones, a servant of Mr Thomas Pugh of Wernllwyd, who claimed to have been robbed of a watch and chain worth 30 shillings, and a purse full of penny and halfpenny pieces. William Jones described how John Davies had knocked him down with a stick and stolen his watch and purse. At a public house, William Jones received assistance from several able-bodied men. Himself, he suffered from a sore leg and could not chase criminals, but when the others made a citizen's arrest of John Davies, Jones came hobbling up and identified the prisoner as the man who had robbed him.



LEFT: A recent photo of the Robber's Grave.

DAVID HUNTER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The research of Mr Tomley and Mr Lloyd would indicate that the Robber's name was John Davies, convicted of highway robbery and executed at Montgomery in August 1821, amidst a tremendous thunderstorm. How the Assizes could be certain of his guilt is something of a mystery: the tale of the two villains perjuring themselves against him is likely to be based on imagination alone. There is a contemporary story that William Jones, the victim of the robbery, had seen a man resembling Davies, and that Jones was later forced to leave the neighbourhood. The account found in the Gaol Files by Mr Lloyd would indicate that William Jones was an honest man and John Davies the guilty party.

For the Legend of the Robber's Grave to gain credibility, we must presume that Robert Owen was right, and that William Jones was a conniving liar who invented the blow-by-blow account of the robbery and the subsequent capture of John Davies that he provided in the Gaol Files. Another version is that John Davies was guilty as charged, but that he had passed the stolen articles over to an accomplice. Was it this accomplice who invented the story of the curse on the scaffold, and spread some herbicidal substance to prevent the grass from growing on the Robber's Grave?

Another curious matter is, of course, how an executed criminal could be buried in a churchyard, although the more cerebral defenders of the legend have suggested that the parcel of land where the Robber was buried was not consecrated at the time, and they may well be right.

From at least the 1920s, the Robber's Grave was something of a tourist attraction. After Mr Lloyd's full-length account of the legend had been published in an obscure local history journal, the *Montgomeryshire Collections*, Vol. 56 (1) of 1959, he was invited to write a short pamphlet on the case, to be put up for sale in the church, containing the words:"The story of the 'Robber's Grave' – the grave of a man unjustly hanged, on which no grass will grow – has for many years been a source of interest not only to the inhabitants of Montgomery, but to visitors to the town, and it is, indeed, known in many English-speaking lands overseas."

When featured by BBC News Mid Wales on 28 August 2007, the grass had covered large parts of the Robber's Grave, as proven by a photograph. A person who visited Montgomery a few years ago took note of the interest in the Robber's Grave from travelling forteans.

The credibility of the legend of the Robber's Grave would have been seriously undermined had there been other folklore accounts of innocent men being executed and no grass growing upon their graves, but this does not appear to be the case. The only instance I was able to find concerns the career criminal Marion 'Peg-leg' Brown, executed for murder in London, Ontario, in 1899. He pleaded his innocence and swore that no grass would grow on his (unmarked) grave – which is now covered by a parking lot.

Whether you believe in the legend of the Robber's Grave will depend on the credence you give to supernatural events such as curses and natural wonders. Such beliefs were widely held in 1821, but are less commonly met with today. There is no logical explanation as to why grass would not grow on the grave of a wrongly executed man, and maybe the best analysis of this ancient legend is: it happened many years ago, and anyway the story is not true.

JAN BONDESON is a retired medical consultant, author of numerous books on medical curiosities and a regular FT contributor.

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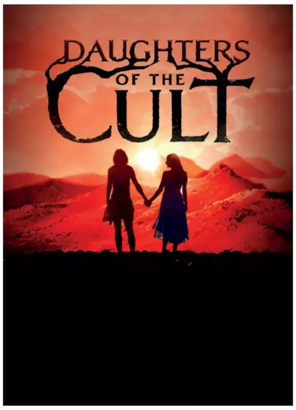
Murderous Mormons

MIKITA BROTTMAN wonders how we account for the recent bumper crop of Mormon-related true crime TV shows.

If you enjoyed the third season of *Wild Crime* on Hulu – the one about Mormon-raised serial killer Israel Keyes – you were probably told you "might also like" *Daughters of the Cult*, a five-episode Hulu true crime series about Ervil LeBaron, "The Mormon Manson". If you're hankering for more Mormon mayhem, you could also check out *Murder Among the Mormons* on Netflix, a recent mini-series about Latter-day Saints Church (LDS) forger and bomber Mark Hofman. Netflix might suggest you next watch *Sins of Our Mother*, about an apocalyptic Mormon cult. If that doesn't appeal, how about *Under The Banner of Heaven*, the story of two detectives investigating a brutal LDS killing?

What's the deal with Mormons and murder, and why are TV streaming services apparently competing to supply us with a feast of Mormon-related true crime?

Obviously, murderers have all kinds of religious affiliations, but it does appear that a disproportionate number of high-profile killings seem to be committed within the Mormon Church, given LDS members account for less than 2% of the population. The murders that get most attention (often because they're made into true-crime miniseries) are those that focus not on murderers who just happen to be Mormons, but those where Mormonism is at the heart of the crime, or plays a vital role.



There's no end of morbid and juicy cases ripe for TV adaptation

In an age of increased secularisation, certain types of spiritual beliefs can start to seem retrograde, regressive, and even a little creepy. The LDS Church is a religion, not a cult, but to those on the outside, the way Mormons isolate themselves from mainstream society can seem disturbing, fostering a sense of exclusiveness which can appear superior and righteous. To some, the LDS Church is stranger than many other separatist religions because its adherents abide by rigid rules and beliefs such as strict commandments against sex, alcohol, even tea and coffee. Their morality seems archaic and confusing. And then there's polygamy – a sexy topic perennially popular with TV shows like TLC's *Sister Wives*. (Although officially denounced, polygamy is still practised by adherents of various LDS churches and groups; see **FT347:36-43.**)

In some ways, it's not surprising that Mormonism is associated with violence. The religion began with a murder, when founder Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were shot and killed in 1844, while in jail on charges of treason. Like many nascent religions, the Mormons faced significant persecution in the early 19th century, and the early history of the Church involved a long series of battles and massacres. More significantly, violence was part of early LDS doctrine, as with the notion of "blood atonement," which involved sinners atoning for certain transgressions by "having their blood spilt upon the ground, that the smoke thereof might ascend to heaven as an offering for their sins". During the "temple endowment," a ceremony designed for Mormons to become kings, queens, priests, and priestesses in the afterlife, participants were warned that, should they reveal the secrets of the ceremony, they would submit to certain forms of execution which they then symbolically enacted: throat slitting, heart removal, and disembowelment. The ceremony was officially dropped by the LDS in 1990, but many Mormons remain proud of the way Joseph Smith and other prophets "sealed their testimony with their blood".

Isolation breeds mistrust and paranoia. Many high-profile crimes associated with the LDS community occur when a splinter group breaks away from the Church to forms its own cult-like and extremist version of Mormonism. As we learn in Hulu's *Wild Crime*, serial killer Israel Keyes was raised in the LDS Church until he was five, when his family joined an isolated spinoff church called The Ark, whose members believed in anti-Semitism and white supremacy. Hulu's *Daughters of the Cult* (2024) investigates the sinister guru Ervil LeBaron, who left the LDS to form a fundamentalist cult called the Church of the First Born on the Lamb of God. Ervil and his brother Heber were found responsible for the deaths of over 20 people they considered apostates (**FT387:5**).

Sins of the Mother (2022), on Netflix, focuses on the case of Lori Vallow and Chad Daybell, who deviated from mainstream Mormonism to form an apocalyptic "doomsday cult" that prophesied the world would end in July 2020. Reportedly, Lori became convinced that she was a deity destined to play a role in the coming apocalypse. She began to believe not only that her family was getting in the way of her mission, but that family members had been replaced by zombie lookalikes. She and Chad were found guilty of murdering four people, including her two young children (**FT395:4, 7**).

Put together a spinoff church, polygamy and a charismatic leader, and you often encounter sexual abuse. The Netflix mini-series *Keep Sweet: Pray and Obey* (2022) details the crimes of Warren Jeffs, former president of another spinoff, the Fundamentalist LDS. Jeffs sired more than 60 children and had wives as young as 12. He was arrested after going on the run (and ending up on *America's Most Wanted*), and finally convicted of multiple counts of sexual abuse.

We're still riding high on the true crime wave, and there's no end of morbid and juicy cases ripe for TV adaptation. To beat the competition, savvy programmers have clearly realised their true crime shows need an extra twist – and what could be creepier than a murderer with a Mormon connection? You don't need to look far. After all, Gary Gilmore, famous for demanding the fulfillment of his own death sentence for two murders he committed in Utah, was a Mormon. A final fun fact: even serial killer Ted Bundy, during a break from his killing spree, was baptised into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

MIKITA BROTTMAN is a true crime writer and professor of literature at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. Her most recent book is *Guilty Creatures: Sex, God and Murder in Tallahassee, Florida.*

When the cuckoo calls

CHRIS SAUNDERS welcomes the return to Britain of that most mysterious of birds, the cuckoo, whose arrival is freighted with legend and folklore

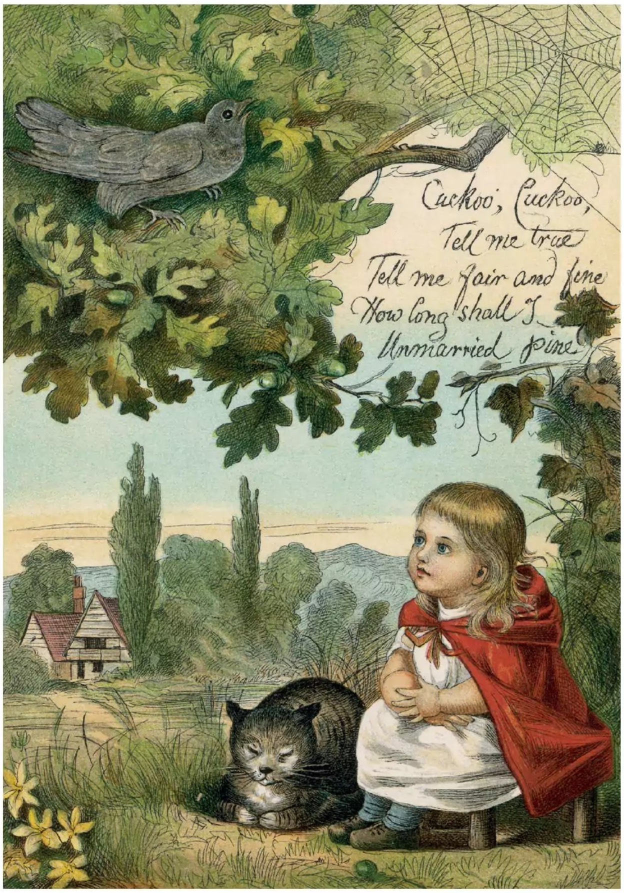
The arrival of the cuckoo when it returns to UK shores from its winter sojourn in Africa represents the first rays of spring. But traditionally, the advent doesn't just herald the beginning of a new season, but also a whole wave of weirdness. Cuckoos have played a prominent role in human culture for thousands of years, to such an extent that few other creatures hold such a revered place in myth and folklore. Pliny the Elder wrote that cuckoos have a magical ability to protect from pestilence with their distinctive calls, while in Japan the bird has come to symbolise unrequited love and longing. In Greek mythology, they are sacred to the goddess Hera, and in Indian culture are forever associated with Kamadeva, the god of desire and longing. Interestingly, the bird also lends its name to the term 'cuckhold' or 'cuckold', a derogatory term to describe the husband of an adulterous wife. Even as far back as AD 50 the cuckoo's scientific name, *cuculus*, was used as a term of reproach, particularly aimed at men, while the term 'cuckoo' has entered everyday vernacular as a way of describing someone presumed to be mentally unstable.

In Scotland, France and Germany, it was said to be unlucky to hear a cuckoo before breakfast, with the latter territory doubling down to add that hearing the call during *any* meal signified a year of hunger and hardship to come. In Norway, if a cuckoo was heard calling from the west it was said to grant your wishes, but if heard to the north it was considered the much more ominous-sounding 'death cuckoo'.

Historically, it was believed in many regions that the call of a cuckoo was a prelude to worsening weather. In his memoir of life in Clonmany in County Donegal, for example, Charles McGlinchey (1861-1954), noted that the "cuckoo always took a storm with her."[1] In many parts of the UK it was considered unlucky to see the first cuckoo of the year before the first swallow, while in an eerie parallel to the traditional Norwegian custom, ill fortune was said to befall anyone who heard a cuckoo calling from their left and a year of good luck could be expected if the call came from your right. Hearers also needed to take note of which direction they happened to be facing, for if they looked toward a graveyard when hearing the call they themselves might be dead within the year.

A popular superstition in Norfolk maintained that whatever you were doing the first time you heard the cuckoo call, that was what you would be doing most frequently for the rest of the year (one can only hope it was something pleasant!). In a tradition seemingly specific to the North of England, on hearing the cuckoo's call boys would take money out of their pockets and spit on it for luck. A more widespread belief held that turning over the coins in your pocket while the cuckoo called would bring future prosperity, and a variation of this custom maintained that throwing coins from hand to hand while listening was the best way to ensure financial stability for the rest of the year. It was said on the island of Guernsey that when the first cuckoo of the year was spotted (or, more probably, heard), you should balance a stone on your head and run as fast as you could until the stone fell off. Then you should mark the spot where the stone landed and return the next day, when you might just find

ALAN SHEARMAN / FLICKR



CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

TOP: A common cuckoo visiting Surrey in the spring of 2022. **ABOVE**: An example of prophetic cuckoo folklore in a sentimental Victorian illustration.

some money beneath it.[2] This notion of ‘growth’ may stem from the fact that the cuckoo appears in spring, when days get longer and plants and flowers bloom.

Some say additional riches can be expected if the first call is heard on 28 April. On this date, sometimes referred to as ‘Cuckoo Day’, the people of Towednack in Cornwall hold a festival to remember a local farmer who placed a large log on his hearth to warm himself – when a cuckoo flew out of it. Some versions of the tale say the bird died and the farmer felt the need to honour it, while others suggest he caught the bird and placed it in a cage, then gathered his friends and some local musicians to join him in parading it around the village in celebration. As far as I can tell, the festival is still being held in some form today. A Facebook post by Towednack Parish Church dated 19 April 2018 read: “Reports that the cuckoo has been heard mean that the Towednack Feast can go ahead.” A similar post was made in 2023, but without the cuckoo reference.

Perhaps because it is heard so much more often than it is seen, giving it a somewhat mysterious reputation, the cuckoo has taken on more prophetic qualities in Wales. In April 2005 the *Daily Post* reported that in Carnarvonshire it was customary for old people to kiss their hands when they first heard the cuckoo and ask: “Cuckoo, cuckoo, how long shall I live?”[3]

The newspaper also reports that when the Welsh folklorist Elias Owen visited a sick old friend in the spring of 1895, the friend revealed that as he had heard the cuckoo’s call he would not only recover but would be free of illness for the next year. Owen added that he had previously heard about a young but very ill man who had attempted to leave his sickbed specifically to hear the cuckoo, but had been unable to manage it and later died. It is quite possible that these ‘deathbed’ tales may have arisen from the negative connotations associated with laziness, as in “if you are still in bed when the cuckoo calls, nothing good can come of it”.

LEFT: Marsden in Yorkshire has an annual Cuckoo Festival, which includes a procession through the village led by the cuckoo and the Thieving Magpies Morris dancers.

MARSDEN CUCKOO FESTIVAL / FACEBOOK

It was considered unlucky to see the first cuckoo before the first swallow

Interestingly, noted Irish poet Jane Wilde harboured a similar belief, providing the following account: “A lady who arrived on a visit at a house observed one morning a cuckoo perched on the window-sill, but she felt no alarm, for there was no sickness in the family. Next day, however, one of the sons was carried home dead. He had been thrown from his horse when hunting, and killed on the spot.”

On a more cheerful note, it was also said that if a coal miner heard the bird’s call for the first time that year while on his way to work, he would immediately tell the colliery manager, who would declare a celebratory holiday. The miners would then inevitably decamp to the local pub to ‘wet the cuckoo’. Anecdotal evidence suggests this practice was not exclusive to miners but was prevalent throughout other trades and industries.

A superstition so common that it is repeated verbatim as far afield as China maintains that the number of calls you here directly corresponds to the number of years you have left to live, while yet another widespread tradition states that if you find a grey hair under your foot when you first hear the cuckoo call you will have a long life, but if the hair happens to be dark it will instead be a short one. Several of these customs hint at transformation, which could again suggest they have their roots in the representation of seasonal change. For example, a German tradition maintains that the cuckoo has the ability to transform itself into a Sparrow Hawk on St John’s Day.

Many of the negative connotations associated with the cuckoo probably derive from its questionable behaviour. It is a highly secretive bird, and a known brood parasite, meaning the female will lay eggs that have evolved to closely resemble those of its chosen host in the nests of different species, where it leaves them to be hatched and cared for by a surrogate. And it doesn’t end there. After hatching, cuckoo chicks have been known to kill or remove the other eggs and chicks from the nest, and even adjust their begging call to resemble the communication system of their unwitting foster parents.

In the Celtic tradition, cuckoos were considered to have the ability to travel between worlds and because of this were often associated with death and the afterlife. In fact, the mere call of the cuckoo was said to have the power to summon the dead. One of the more interesting cuckoo-associated legends says that at sunrise on Midsummer morning on the island of Lewis, in the Outer Hebrides, its call will mark the arrival of a mysterious deity known as ‘The Shining One’, which manifests and walks through the Avenue, a section of the Calanais or Callanish Stones.[4] While their purpose is unclear, the Calanais Stones are said to be among Britain’s oldest man-made structures and according to some sources predate Stonehenge and even the Great Pyramids of Egypt. The ‘Avenue’ in question, which is 83.2m (273ft) long and consists of 19 standing stones, connects the main stone circle from the north-northeast. One story suggests that the stones were once giants, but were turned into stone by St Kieran when they refused to convert to Christianity.

Some researchers believe that the ‘Shining One’ of legend might be a reference to the Celtic god Lugh (associated with the Sun, light, justice, and the harvest), while others claim it is more likely a remnant of some long-forgotten fertility ritual. However, most agree that the site of the Calanais Stones relates in some way to the lunar landscape, particularly the rising and setting of the Moon at specific times, like the lunar standstill, an event which happens every 18.6 years when the Moon appears at its most northern position.

Incidentally, the next lunar standstill peaked in January 2025, but can be seen until the middle of the year – the time frame coinciding perfectly with the much-fabled return of the cuckoo.

NOTES

1 https://thefadingyear.wordpress.com/2023/04/13/the-cuckoo-in-irish-folklore/

2 www.bbc.co.uk/guernsey/content/articles/2004/07/21/folklore_cuckoo_feature.shtml

3 www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/omen-of-cuckoos-spring-call-2912987

4 https://spookyscotland.net/calanais/

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STRANGE STATESMEN #63

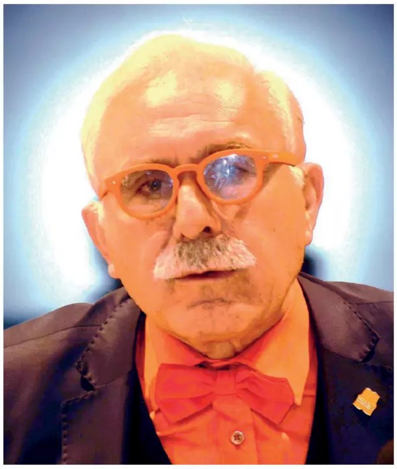
ORANGE DISORDERS

Five years on from the start of Covid-19 lockdowns across Europe, **SD TUCKER** profiles the vested interests of Italy's Orange anti-vax General, an artiste of rare genius seeking to bring harmony to mankind (once he's sorted out some minor copyright issues with Paul McCartney).

INDEPENDENT PHOTO AGENCY SRL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

March 2025 marked five years since Boris Johnson announced the initial UK coronavirus lockdown. Yet Britain was not the earliest European nation to do so. During February 2020 Italy was the first Western country to be hit hard by the pandemic, its prompt lockdown providing a model soon to be copied elsewhere, for good or for ill. In the years since, there have turned out to be many good reasons for concerned citizens to have objected to quarantines and vaccines alike – but also some very bad ones, as Italians were to discover.

Being first into quarantine meant Italians were also early to develop their own native anti-vax movement in the shape of the *Gilet Arancioni*, or 'Orange Vests', who held mass gatherings in city squares nationwide in direct defiance of strict social-distancing laws imposed by what they called the "health dictatorship" of their then-PM Giuseppe Conte. Many were ordinary plebs dismayed by their businesses being trashed by lockdown, but they were also joined by perennial attention-seekers like Gabriele Paolini, 'The Prophylactic Prophet', who enjoys tricking Popes into accepting gifts of hidden condoms, and David Fabbri, a fake priest and one-time stripper with a prior conviction for distributing pro-Mussolini flyers reading "Uncle Benito comes back to life for a cleaner world". Best known for throwing a banana at a black MP (he said he was framed by secret agents) and exorcising a "demonic" statue of a fawn with a large erection abducting a small boy, Fabbri now swanned around bearing a crucifix and a photo of Microsoft's Bill Gates captioned 'THE ANTICHRIST 666', and casting curses against PM Conte. One Orange Vester announced that Conte had phoned Gates to donate 140 million Euros of tax-payers' money to enable him to "inject mercury into our veins" via fake vaccines, thus allowing 5G rays to penetrate citizens' blood, whereupon "we will become little robots" – a garbled reference to Conte handing Gates's charities funds to develop virus treatments. Protestors wore day-glo orange hi-viz jackets, inspired by the famed yellow-clad *gilets jaunes* rebels of France – hence the movement's name.[1]



LEFT: General Antonio Pappalardo in trademark specs.

> HE WORE BRIGHT ORANGE SUITS AND MATCHING SPECTACLES

Even odder than the Orange troops was their marshal, General Antonio Pappalardo, a moustachioed 73-year-old of avuncular mien, who signified his seniority in rank by wearing bright orange suits, and sometimes matching orange-framed spectacles and bow-tie. He led his crowds in lively chants of "Liberty! Liberty! Liberty!" like Garibaldi gone horribly wrong. At first glance, *Il Generale*'s anti-vax ideas do not appear especially unorthodox; even his statement that masks should not be worn as "I cannot look a woman in the face without knowing if she's beautiful or ugly" hardly seems that outrageous for a politician in the land of Silvio Berlusconi. Pappalardo thought Covid-19 just "a kind of stupid flu", which "is not lethal" for anyone but the "already sick" over-eighties, who were about to die anyway. "The pandemic does not exist, it's total bullshit," he announced, adding, "Whoever puts on a mask, I'll slap him" – for his own good, as such idiots were in danger of being hospitalised "for excessive use" of face-coverings. "Breathe deeply! The lungs are mine and I take care of them. Breathing is sacred!" he said. Far better treatment would be to perform yoga and "self-concentration", as "man is made of physique, but also of mind". Tellingly, during lockdown, "those who have stayed at home have not died", while "whoever entered a hospital, died." Duped into thinking their patients all had Covid, ward-doctors gave them "incorrect therapies such as intubation", when they were really suffering quite separate maladies like diabetes, leading to 35,000 needless deaths.

Il Generale hinted darkly that he knew "how 'phenomena' are governed" by the Deep State, saying the laughable notion of asymptomatic illness was our Shadow Rulers' best scam yet, part of "a criminal plan to kill Italy". Every four years, regular as a clockwork orange, the WHO and "those gentlemen who have 75% of the [world's] wealth in their hands, Bill Gates, Rockefeller, Rothschild" invent new hoax illnesses like mad cow disease, Covid-19 being their latest fiction. Sensationally revealing the (non-existent) mass burning of plague-corpses, Pappalardo ordered his "best lawyers" to intervene. Covid-19 was "an organised bluff" concocted to force voters to "live in our homes as inmates" while "scoundrels sell our country to foreign powers" led by the New World Order (NWO) and Illuminati. The true "evil of the planet is the deadly electromagnetic radiation" caused by 5G phone-masts, he warned: "Too many radars, too many antennas." Lombardy, an early Covid-19 hotspot, was "full of 5G!" and the Covid 'victims' there had actually been fried by wi-fi; in fact, there were then only three 5G masts in the entire region. Mussolini had been allowed to seize the country with his 1922 'March on Rome', Pappalardo complained, but the Orange Vesters had been treated badly: MPs had cancelled all the buses, hence the relatively low turn-out for their own Orange Duce's rallies. Happily, you needed no bus ticket to view his many online videos, where millions heard him speculate about the existence of parallel universes or talk policy with clever parrots.[2]

YOU'RE UNDER A VEST

Although often appearing in full uniform, the 'General' was never in the actual army; he was a Brigadier-General in the *Carabinieri*, an armed quasi-military Italian police

NURPHOTO SRL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

IL NUOVO TESTAMENTO
LETTERE
E APOCALIS

ABOVE: An orange-suited General Antonio Pappalardo arrives at the *Gilet Arancioni* anti-lockdown protest in Milan on 30 May 2020. **BELOW:** Fake priest David Fabbri.

unit – albeit he only actually achieved this rank as a ceremonial courtesy upon reaching pension age in 2006 and was stripped of the title in 2021 to avert public confusion, an act he dubbed "heresy", demanding two million Euros in damages. In 1981, Pappalardo was elected to sit on COCER, an inter-forces committee body, giving him a taste for politics. In 1993, he became Undersecretary of State for Finance in the Italian government, lasting a fortnight before being removed following a defamation suit. Rejected, he has since realised the entire Italian State is a giant sham, whose Constitution of 1948 was an illegal document, robbing the people of their sovereignty. Thus, all 'elected' politicians are illegitimate, as the Italian electoral system itself is innately unlawful. The only true means of election is therefore for angry citizens to gather in the street and appoint their leaders directly, without the charade of the ballot-box – which, in practice, means small mobs of fantasists begging Pappalardo to become their commander, an offer which, unlike Caesar upon the Feast of Lupercal, the cosplay Mussolini seems loathe to refuse.

His main Covid-era political vehicle, of which the Orange Vests were but an offshoot, was the Movement for Italian Liberation (MLI), headed up by "a committee of 12 wise founders", who "do not have to do politics" in the usual sense. Instead, they seek a new Constitution, and spend most of their time 'arresting' Italian MPs as imposters, the standard procedure for which involves Pappalardo typing up a bogus arrest warrant on his computer, getting his friends to sign it, and then serving it on its target by reading it out to them in a public place while calling them traitors. In Pappalardo's interpretation, if he then goes to the nearest police station and tells them this warrant has been served, the cops must, by code of honour, go out and handcuff the miscreants – although, strangely, they never actually do. Throughout 2017, Pappalardo supporters marched through Rome, handing MPs "eviction notices" outside parliament and "cancelling" their right to govern. These vile "squatters" ejected, a hundred or so "SOVEREIGN PEOPLE" then stood around and elected Italy's "First Legitimate Government, unanimously and by direct acclamation" instead. Pappalardo was to be leader, obviously, but another intriguing appointment was his Minister of Health and Scientific Research, a homeopath named Salvatore Rainò, who claims to have invented a form of "computerised water" with incredible curative powers.[3]

Alea iacta est, the Rubicon was now crossed, and Caesar's 2017 mutiny was to culminate in "a Christmas of freedom", with Pappalardo printing papers for the arrest of President Sergio Mattarella, Italy's fake Head of State. Yet, ironically, this act put Pappalardo on the wrong side of the law and saw him being indicted for contempt of the Office of the President of the Republic and threatened with genuine arrest for attempting to perform a false one. (In December 2024, the General finally had such charges against him fully dismissed.) Rebels now lodged a court appeal to get the scheduled elections of March 2018 cancelled, as the phony candidates on the ballot-paper would only "make you vomit". But they went ahead anyhow, and Pappalardo's crowds dwindled to fewer than 30.

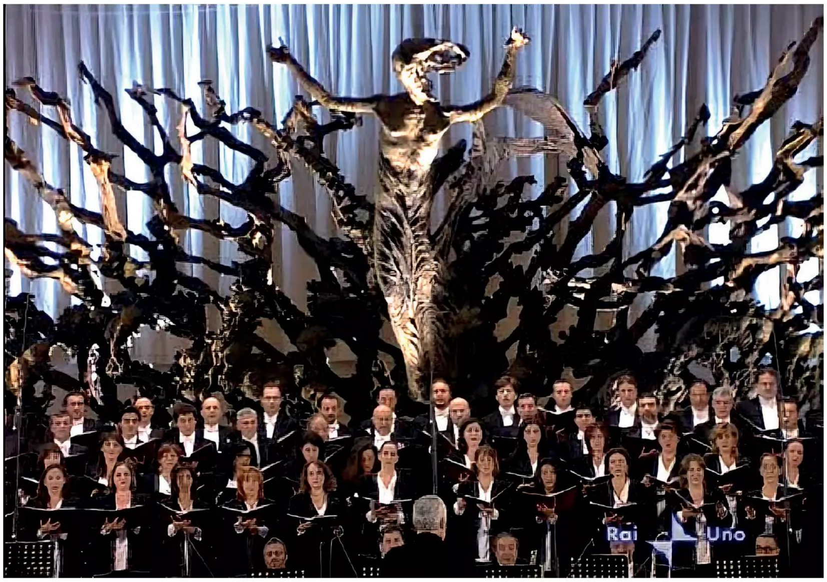
This was a far cry from his glory days of 2000, when *Il Generale* had tried to encourage what many saw as a military coup. Pappalardo exploited his COCER role to distribute a strange document, *Report on the State of Morale and Well-Being of Citizens*, to *Carabinieri* offices across the country, calling for the "foundation of a new type of State" in which political parties would be abolished in favour of what sounded suspiciously like a police dictatorship. Pappalardo had developed a curious "Theorem of Irrationality", illustrated by a triangle on whose sides the terms 'PEOPLE', 'POLITICANS' and 'CARABINIERI' were written. From the 'PEOPLE', an arrow pointed towards the 'CARABINIERI', with the word 'LOVE' upon it, meaning the public all love a policeman. Then an arrow linked 'POLITICIANS' with 'CARABINIERI', bearing the word 'BEWARE!', showing MPs disliked the force. But the final arrow, linking 'PEOPLE' and 'POLITICIANS', read 'ELECT'. If the people LOVE the *Carabinieri* and ELECT MPs, but the MPs must BEWARE of the *Carabinieri*, because they are all crooks, then how can parliament possibly reflect the wishes of the voters? It can't, so it must be abolished in the name of 'LOVE'.

Pappalardo soon left COCER, but the public scandals he unleashed there made his name, letting him ride upon any popular street-movement going, like the *Forcone*, or 'Pitchforks', a group of angry, hard-pressed farmers who marched on Rome in fury long before the Orange Vests ever did. When illegal Mediterranean migration became a problem, he then popped up to claim he had visited Dubai with "the President of the European Muslims" and negotiated an agreement to make North Africa's deserts fertile so nobody would ever want to flee them – Arabia's sheikhs were, he assured voters, "ready to pay for everything". Long before Covid-19 struck, the General was also already cannily courting the anti-vax movement, as shown by his abortive 2018 attempt to arrest Italy's then-Health Minister, Beatrice Lorenzin, during a press-conference. Pappalardo barged in, waving around his usual dodgy print-out, asking journalists if they knew Lorenzin was not really the Minister of Health at all, but an "abusive" imposter. He had already personally seen children who had "turned into monsters" after being given State vaccines, saying that "If I were their father, I'd take up a machine-gun and shoot the Minister." He didn't go that far this time, but, surrounded by cameras, the General felt sure of becoming a TV-news sensation – only to find that, as nobody there had even recognised him, he was later described on-air simply as "a man". Livid, he took this snub as another sign of Italy's NWO capture, with the plebs being kept in deliberate ignorance of their potential saviour's identity because the Illuminati-bought MPs were "shitting themselves" because they might otherwise be jabbed off-stage with pitchforks.[4]

NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL MUSIC!

However, politics is in truth but a sideline for Pappalardo. In reality, he says, "I am a writer, poet, novelist, composer… I live on art, not on words." Among his poetry anthologies are *And If Dead, We Do Not Live*, *The Infinite Ways of the Soul* and, fittingly, *Lies*, while his multi-volume biography began with the excitingly-named *COCER Carabinieri: Chronicle of a Trade Union Adventure* and ended with *The General Who Makes You Dream*, via way of *The Colonel Tells… True, Fantastic, Bizarre, Dramatic, Irreverent, Pungent Stories, Censored by an Institutional Political Class.* He was also once a promising youth-footballer, or "champion of Italy in the junior category" of this sport, as he modestly puts it – truly, a da Vinci-esque man of many talents, yet music is surely his foremost calling.

"I am one of the greatest musicians in the world," he has boasted. "In the Vatican, I am considered a genius enlightened by God." Indeed, in 2006 he was, quite genuinely, honoured by having an opera score performed in St Peter's Basilica, celebrating its 500th anniversary. So powerful was the piece that it converted certain awe-struck witnesses to Christianity on the spot. Being the very "sound of Heaven", it was clear "no creature made only of muscles and bones" could compose it, only a being directly inspired by The Lord – who, ergo, must really exist after all. In 2014, St Antonio had the idea of ending Israel and Palestine's Forever War via the medium of music, touring the Holy Land from Jerusalem to Jericho as part of 'Operation Peace On Earth', staging various of his own awe-inspiring compositions to motivate the locals to stop continually killing each other. Doubtless these concerts included *Vita Nova*, an oratorio dedicated to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *Missa Militum*, a mass sung in honour of "the peacekeepers of the world" and *Bhailpevaco*, a timeless "rock-opera about interreligious dialogue". Pappalardo also established a peace-making organisation named 'Atlantis', headed up by 10 key members named the 'Vitanovisti', below whom would sit a sub-committee of 100, the 'Exemplars'. These would then recruit 1,000 'Ladies' and 'Knights', who must enlist 10,000 subordinate 'Alfieri' in turn. This Atlantean pyramid-scheme complete, the society would then solve the Israel-Palestine conflict forever by doing… well, by doing *something*; the General never really fully explained.



ABOVE: A performance of Pappalardo's oratorio *Vita Nova* in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall in 2003.

A SERIES OF CONCERTS TO BE HELD IN SEVEN SYMBOLIC CITIES

By September 2020, with the fake 'plandemic' in full swing, Pappalardo finally fleshed out his pacifist plan, in the shape of an official Orange Vest project for 'The Great North-South Corridor', intended to unite Europe and North Africa musically, spiritually and politically via a series of concerts to be held in the seven symbolic cities of London, Paris, Milan, Rome, Naples, Sicily (not actually a city…) and Tunis. In a promotional interview, the musical genius spoke of how Italy was once "the country of Bel Canto… of Verdi, Puccini, Rossini, Bellini and evocative Neapolitan songs," but that, post-WWII, "the Americans invaded us with their music" which at first was "rhythmic", but soon degenerated into "atonal" trash.

Becoming a composer aged only 14, during the 1960s Pappalardo sought to combat the NWO plot to pollute Italian ear-drums by writing his own competing, specifically *Italian* symphonies, which were sadly not performed until 1997. However, once they were, "[all other] modern composers were abandoned", with *Il Generale*'s music "running everywhere, and whoever hears it is amazed that music of this level can be composed… [saying] 'You, dear Maestro, with your music penetrate the human soul and pervade it all'." As his music "is like the wild and strong landscape of many areas of the Sicilian hinterland," it acts as an aural nativist counterbalance to Illuminati Top-10 filth, and provides mankind's best hope against enslavement; it causes "a tsunami of feelings" in the human stomach, which is the true organ of emotion, not the heart, and reveals to men they are not robots, which Bill Gates wants to turn us into through 5G means. But how did Bill's plot work?

In 2007, the NWO "granted all men cellphones", pledging to bring them closer together. However, "this diabolical tool" would only push them further apart at the whim of "sects that I do not hesitate to define as Satanic". Come Covid-19, social-distancing laws meant an already phone-addicted mankind was forced to abandon face-to-face interaction entirely and engage only in "telematic processes", which acted to "robotise the human being". With everyone now always standing at least one metre apart, NWO spy-satellites could pinpoint the location of every phone-user on Earth without their signals getting mixed up, this being the true purpose of this nefarious measure, which really did nothing to stop virus transmission at all. Pappalardo's counter-plan was to unite Europe with Africa as the initial stage in the creation of a "widespread web of human corridors that will unite all living beings in a concrete, real and tangible way", in contrast to the NWO's own worldwide web of social alienation. The best way to unite the globe was through music, "the only universal language" able to "overcome the telematic language controlled by sects and strong powers".

Naturally, the music so used would be Pappalardo's own, and would include *Ego Sum Homo*, to be performed in Rome, whose special notes had the power "to prevent humanity from being dehumanised"; *The Carthage Symphony*, to be played in Tunis, where the Arab Spring had begun in 2010, to invoke the spirit of "a people that destroyed a dictator"; and T*he Beatles Symphony*, in honour of the mop-topped Mersey-men who proved once and for all that "All You Need Is Love", to be staged in London, "the starting point of the Great Corridor" (why not Liverpool?). These fine concerts would become "the most fascinating moment in the life of all conscious beings" who attended them, reunited at last in non-socially-distanced mass gatherings of joy, where they would be "dragged to perceive new sensations and emotions with poignant melodies and rhythms", leading them to rebel forever against "the dictator, Conte". Then, "with bridges and with music, a criminal design will be defeated", one "which intends to eliminate the human race, to create subjects who will have to obey rules from above imposed by minds that consider themselves enlightened" – the Illuminati, or 'Enlightened Ones'. The *Carabinieri* would then expose "the shady drug and virus trafficking of pharmaceutical companies" before blocking 5G and eliminating all Deep State brainwashing of infants at the hands of those "possessed by Satan", like social workers. People must not think of the Italians as "all spaghetti and mandolins" but as freedom-fighters, who would, under the composer's heroic musical direction, thwart "the great Masonic-Jewish conspiracies" and their next mad scheme to create a "food dictatorship" aiming to impose a 'Codex Alimentarius' upon humanity, telling them what they could and couldn't put in their own damn mouths.[5]

John Lennon had once warbled that "You say you want a revolution? Oh well, you know… we'd all love to see the plan"; but John was dead (probably at the hands of the NWO), so *Il Generale* had to settle for trying to contact Paul McCartney about his world-saving *Beatles Symphony* instead. In February 2020, when Covid-19 first hit Italy, Pappalardo bowed towards Macca by posting a message on McCartney's Twitter account, asking for his e-mail address so he could send on his *Meisterwerk* as an attachment. No reply being forthcoming, in April the General tried again, this time in Inglese: "I'm Maestro Antonio Pappalardo, musical composer. In this period of grave mourning for the whole world, I would like to send a message to Paul McCartney. Can you send me your e-mail? Thanks." But McCartney did not reply. Like so many rock stars, he must have been a tool of the Illuminati too, as anyone who has ever seen that footage of him turning into a lizard on YouTube will know. *Il Maestro*'s only hope now was to turn to worlds other than Planet Pop for help. Enter a six-foot-tall alien novelist from the Planet Ummo…

To be continued…

NOTES

1 *Times*, 6 June 2020; www.nextquotidiano.it/david-fabbri-finto-prete-da-pappalardo-2-giugno-manifestazione-dei-gilet-arancioni/; https://sputniknews.com/20190514/backlash-exorcist-demons-italian-penis-statue-1074989432.html; www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/06/02/news/2_giugno_gilet_arancioni_piazza_del-popolo-258266894; www.money.it/Telefonata-Conte-Gates-140-milioni-bufala-Gilet-Arancioni-video. Fabbri has in the past claimed to be the great-grandson of Mussolini and also once appeared on Italian reality TV show Island of the Famous [sic]. Paolini holds a very niche Guinness World Record for most disruptions of TV broadcasts by waving around a condom – over 30,000 at the last count.

2 www.politico.eu/article/italys-orange-jackets-want-power-to-the-people/; www.cnbc.com/2020/06/03/orange-vests-protests-in-rome-leader-says-coronavirus-doesnt-exist.html; www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/06/02/news/2_giugno_gilet_arancioni_piazza_del-popolo-258266894; www.globalist.it/news/2020/05/30/pappalardo-il-gilet-arancione-che-sostiene-che-covid-19-e-un-inganno-e-si-cura-con-lo-yoga-2059196.html; www.niusdiario.es/internacional/antonio-pappalardo-chalecos-naranjas-italianos-entraremos-quirinal_18_2956545265.html; https://en.difesaonline.it/evidenza/interviste/intervista-esclusiva-al-generale-pappalardo-un-carabiniere-pensione-divenuto; www.corriere.it/cronache/21_settembre_27/pappalardo-non-piu-generale-tolti-gradi-leader-gilet-arancioni-2b638d0a-1fa9-11ec-b908-b44816b61f2f.shtml; https://pagellapolitica.it/blog/show/698/le-bufale-contro-la-scienza-del-generale-pappalardo; https://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2017/10/10/news/i-migliori-video-del-generale-pappalardo-il-rivoluzionario-con-la-passione-per-il-web-1.311829/

3 "As a sea-lover," explained Dr Rainò, he has increasingly begun to notice Italy's water is giving off bad vibes. This is because the world's oceans are the "receptacle of memories of contemporary civilisation". As contemporary civilisation is a total mess, however, this means the sea itself is giving off "spectra of emissions that are not good for health" of a "biomagnetic nature". So, you should buy the wannabe Minister of Health and Scientific Research's 'acquascission' machine, which "emits a soft ionic wind" and "is able to reset water from pre-acquired spurious memories" when you fasten it to the end of your tap at home. See www-affaritaliani-it/blog/la-colonna-infame/salute-l-acqua-scissa-migliora-il-metabolismo-umano-445157.html

4 www.repubblica-it/online/cronaca/cocer/documento/documento.html; www.statewatch.org/statewatch-database/italy-carabinieri-s-new-status-sparks-controversy/; http://www.laboratoriopoliziademocratica.org/documen/pappalardo.htm; www-veneziaradiotv-it/blog/gen-antonio-pappalardo-movimento-italia/; https://www.ilgiorno.it/cronaca/antonio-pappalardo-tolti-gradi-1.6851687; www.repubblica.it/politica/2021/09/28/news/generale_antonio_pappalardo_carabinieri_degradato-319818285/; https://archivo.giornalettismo.com/antonio-pappalardo-storia-di-un-golpe-borghese-piccolo-piccolo/; www.newsly.it/generale-pappalardo-prova-arrestare-lorenzin-video/; www.nextquotidiano.it/antonio-pappalardo-ha-arrestato-beatrice-lorenzin/; www-nextquotidiano-it/11-settembre-generale-antonio-pappalardo/; www.nextquotidiano.it/come-e-finita-la-rivoluzione-del-generale-pappalardo/; www-nextquotidiano-it/arresto-mattarella-pappalardo/; https://destradipopolo.net/il-generale-pappalardo-rinviato-a-giudizio-per-vilipendio-di-mattarella/; www-nextquotidiano-it/ricorso-pappalardo-elezioni-4-marzo/; www.nextquotidiano.it/giovedi-10-maggio-pappalardo/; https://sportelloquotidiano-com/2018/02/17/generale-pappalardo-piazza-cavalli-non-andate-votare-uccidiamo-lo/; https://infodifesa.it/chi-e-antonio-pappalardo-il-generale-della-riviluzione-trash/; www.liberoquotidiano.it/video/italia/13233008/generale-pappalardo-movimento-liberazione-italia-via-politici-abusivi-colpo-di-stato-presidio-davanti-boldrini-.html; www.uonna.it/ponte-sullo-stretto-rumori-di-sciabola.htm. Another reason for Pappalardo's hostility to MPs is that they are merely "young boys" who, by comparison with the 200-plus years' existence of the *Carabinieri*, "still lack the necessary experience" to govern.

5 https://espresso-repubblica-it/attualita/2014/07/16/news/il-generale-ex-forcone-che-vuole-portare-la-pace-in-terra-1.173321; https://rivelazione.net/notizie/a-tutto-campo-con-il-generale-e-maestro-antonio-pappalardo-intervista-del-direttore-di-freedom-marco-magno/; www.niusdiario.es/internacional/antonio-pappalardo-chalecos-naranjas-italianos-entraremos-quirinal_18_2956545265.html; https://en.difesaonline.it/evidenza/interviste/intervista-esclusiva-al-generale-pappalardo-un-carabiniere-pensione-divenuto; www.corriere.it/cronache/21_settembre_27/pappalardo-non-piu-generale-tolti-gradi-leader-gilet-arancioni-2b638d0a-1fa9-11ec-b908-b44816b61f2f.shtml; 'Bhailpevaco' is a portmanteau-word derived from the first (Italian) syllable of each of the key literary works of mankind that inspired its composition: the Bhagavadgita, Iliad, Pentateuch, Gospel and Koran.

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

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Our beloved 'wild talent'

Ian Kidd explores a new work which is indispensable for students of Charles Fort's work, looking at its cultural impact and at the people important to fortean ideas during and after his life

Think to New Worlds

The Cultural History of Charles Fort and his Followers

Joshua Blu Buhs

University of Chicago Press 2024
Hb, 384pp, £28, ISBN 9780226831480

It is an exciting time for scholars of Charles Fort's life, career and ideas. Must-reads include Jim Steinmeyer's excellent biography of Fort, Tanner Boyles's study on his influence on science fiction, Chris Aubeck's collection of Fort's letters and Martin Shough's book *Redemption of the Damned*.

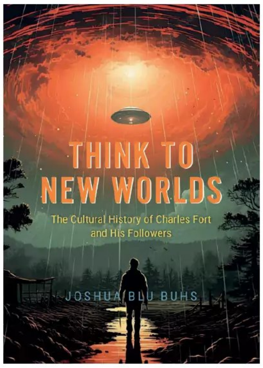
Joshua Blu Buhs's book *Think to New Worlds* now raises the standard and scope of Fort research. It is indispensable for students of Fort's work, especially those interested in his literary and cultural influence.

Buhs should be known to FT readers from his earlier book, *Bigfoot: The Life and Times of a Legend*, and his informative blog *From an Oblique Angle*. His meticulous research shows itself in the immense details across its six chapters – spanning the 1930s to the late 1970s (ending with the founding of FT) – and the 80 pages of notes and references. The scholarship is superb.

Think to New Worlds opens dramatically with "modernity" and its "disenchantment" – two large amorphous concepts which, Buhs argues, created a world where scepticism, fundamentalism and a self-conscious concern for "expanding the imagination" can clash, often in stimulating ways.

Such clashes attracted cranks, religious zealots, science fiction writers, heroes of *avant garde* culture and others who, as Buhs shows, were attracted to Fort. Buhs says less about Theodore Dreiser – Fort's friend, patron, and admirer – and not as much as I hoped about Benjamin De Casseres, the New York philosopher and writer, whom Buhs nicely describes as being in a "mutual admiration dyad with Fort".

Chapter one invites us to "think to new worlds", summarising, for newbies, Fort's life, the four fortean books, the Society, then, sadly, his death and its aftermath. Readers familiar with the story, perhaps from Knight or Steinmeyer, should still read it. Chapter two focuses on two major figures in Fort's posthumous world – Tiffany Thayer (more on him in a moment) and the Liverpudlian Eric Frank Russell. As the main figures in the Fortean Society, on each side of the Atlantic, they were decisive to its fate.



Chapter three proceeds retrospectively to Fort's relationship to "scientific romances" and his influence on *Weird Tales, Amazing Stories*, and other important SF magazines. Look out for interesting bits on James Blish, Robert Heinlein, Hugo Gernsback and some caustic remarks on Fort from Arthur C Clarke ("Scepticism is one thing; stupidity is another").

> *The real villain is Tiffany Thayer, secretary of the Fortean Society and pugnacious crank*

Chapter four returns to Fort's early literary efforts (how many of us have read *The Outcast Manufacturers*?) and 20th-century literary modernism. The erudite references to the "turn towards … individual subjectivity" and "liberal social order" might put off readers less concerned with expansive historical and cultural commentary. Other reviewers have complained about the back-and-forth character of the book; this chapter has the most of that but, to be fair, there are no straightforward stories to tell about Fort's uptake. Enjoy Buhs's accounts of how Fort did, or might, relate to the Bay Area counterculture, Beat poets, sundry bohemians, and Pauwels and Bergier's *Le Matin des Magiciens*. Any readers uninterested in the big picture can delight in the details.

Chapter five takes us from *New Lands* to "the coming of the saucers", pausing to discuss "high strangeness" and John Keel's *Disneyland of the Gods*. In the final chapter, "Future History", Buhs's story ends on the death of Thayer and the Fortean Society and the "neo-fortean" tradition – of INFO, a young British SF fan called RJM Rickard, and a slightly strained section on Fort and contemporary conspiracism.

The real villain of the story is Tiffany Thayer, secretary of the Fortean Society, an adman, author of racy novels and pugnacious crank. Thayer was indifferent to fortean phenomena, provocative in his politics and mismanaged the Society, slowly alienating its members. He is the reason so many of Fort's papers are lost to us. The consolation is the huge web of admirers, critics, and "foes" of Fort collected by Buhs for our delectation. (Did you know Kevin Arnold, of "flying saucer" fame, was probably a member of the Fortean Society? that American patron of the arts Caresse Crosby distributed copies of the Fortean Society magazine *Doubt* at peace conferences?)

Think to New Worlds is at its best when documenting all those writers, scientists, journal editors, poets and others who were, for all sorts of reasons, attracted to Fort. Many are well-known to us: SF writer Eric Frank Russell, Ben Hecht and Booth Tarkington and others. Others are new – Buhs discusses obscure astronomers, poets, and polymaths and "big names" (John Steinbeck, William Burroughs). I have studied Fort's life, career, and reception for almost 30 years and still learned an enormous amount from Buhs's book.

The book ends with a giddy premonition of "future forteanisms, when the world will be – as it was, as it is, as it ever will be – enchanted". As Fort warned, everything is in flux – there is a rhythm of damnation and absolution, heavens and hells.

Joshua Blu Buhs has written a wonderful study of the cultural and literary influence of Fort and his vision of the "damned". All future studies should aspire to meet its standards. It brilliantly confirms, as Knight and Steinmeyer and others intimated, the unsuspected significance to the last century of our beloved "wild talent".

★★★★★

From Salem to spiking

Imagined yet plausible fears frequently capture the headlines, finds **Nigel Watson**

Social Panics & Phantom Attackers

A Study of Imaginary Assailants

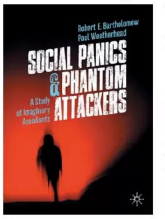
Robert E Bartholomew & Paul Weatherhead

Palgrave Macmillan 2024

Pb, 350pp, £23.55, ISBN 9789819742714

Aliens, Nessie, Bigfoot sightings and their ilk, as we know, are all hard to prove, but you would think assaults by razor-wielding attackers, snipers or drink spikers would leave firm physical evidence to support such claims and enable the perpetrators to be tracked down and captured.

As Bartholomew and Weatherhead show, these types of "phantom" attacks are as difficult to investigate and are as elusive as the likes of Nessie. The authors work their way from fairly plausible social panics like drink spiking, needle sticking, slashers, mad gassers, cat killers, mystery sprayers and snipers to the more fantastic panics involving Monkey Man, Spring-heeled Jack and fears of genital shrinking.


Robert E Bartholomew
Paul Weatherhead
SOCIAL PANICS & PHANTOM ATTACKERS
A Study of Imaginary Assailants

Localised or more wide-scale social panics begin with an initial phase where plausible witnesses tell of being attacked and afterwards discover cuts and scars on their body and suffer headaches, vomiting and other similar symptoms. Newspapers and other media, combined with social platforms today, highlight the story and almost inevitably more witnesses come forward.

Matters escalate so much that the police and health authorities have to investigate these claims and thereby validate the presence of a threat. Fear of further attacks causes people to be more vigilant and fearful. A small mark or blemish on the body that would otherwise be ignored becomes evidence of an attack by someone they glimpsed nearby.

Vigilantes roam the streets to get the phantom attacker; as this book reveals, numerous people have been beaten up, arrested, imprisoned and even killed when the finger of blame is pointed at them.

As things progress you get hoaxers, fantasists, social influencers, amateur sleuths, "experts" and simply the mistaken jumping on the bandwagon. The phantom attacker seems to be everywhere, but no one ever sees him (it is usually suspected it is a male attacker) or witness descriptions are wildly inconsistent.

Things start to unravel when the authorities fail to find any evidence for these claims, or the evidence does not support the claims. Scepticism creeps in about the original stories and after sensational headlines the media backtracks and loses interest.

The authors supply a list of phantom assailant episodes dating from the Salem witch panic of 1691-92 to the European needle spiking from 2021 onwards, showing that such panics have run throughout history.

Such panics do not happen in a sociocultural-historical vacuum; instead they reflect the fears of the period in which they occur. The needle spiking of drinks in the UK in the summer of 2021, for example, occurred after the Covid-19 pandemic when young people were going out drinking for the first time after lockdown. The spiking was fuelled by media hype and fears for the safety of young women; there was no evidence for spiking and the major cause was probably alcoholic intoxication.

This is a fascinating look at the sheer range of imagined – yet to all those involved, plausible – fears, that suddenly explode into existence. And it shows the real impact of these fears on the world around us. Hopefully, these lessons from history should guide future responses to such outbreaks, but as with the continuing UAP/drone panics, they have an extremely powerful influence that defies reason and logic.

★★★★★

Farrelly's Field Guide to Irish Faerie Folk

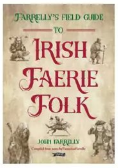
John Farrelly

O'Brien Press 2024

Hb, 80pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781788494144

Farrelly's Field Guide to Irish Faerie Folk is a deceptive little book in several senses. It purports to be the tea-stained notebook of Farrelly's great-grand-uncle Fantasius who recorded the fairies he encountered at home in Ireland. But the jocular tone belies the depth of the content.

This is a guidebook to Irish supernatural creatures. Of course, we spot some of the usual suspects, such as the poster-boy for Irish fairy-lore, the leprechaun. But even here Farrelly tells us something we may not know, that the leprechaun could be a mediæval blow-in, a descendant of Scandinavian fairy folk who hitched a ride on a longship to Ireland, rather than the ancient Celtic sprite we might suppose.



The author packs a lot of detail into a mere 88 pages. He includes lesser known Irish cryptids such as the Aughisky, a waterhorse with seal-like skin, whose carcasses are said to have formed all Irish lakes. Another example is the intriguing Marbh Bheo or "the living dead". Originally rogue fairies, Christianity transformed them into the unforgiven wandering dead. Tales of these proto-vampires inspired Irish author Bram Stoker when creating Dracula. The book is illustrated throughout in the Gothically garish manner of Brian Froud. Each of the 28 creatures featured has an appealing "Top Trumps" style notes section, complete with height comparisons, magical powers and usual habitats, should you wish to try and spot them in the wild!

There are also fragments of historical stories such as the 1895 tragedy of Bridget Cleary, whose husband claimed she was a changeling and killed her. Or the young woman who was killed by the dobhar-chu, a gigantic carnivorous otter, "half-wolf, half-fish".

Footnotes point us towards renowned folklorists such as WB Yeats, Robert Kirk and Douglas Hyde. And there is a pronunciation guide which is always helpful.

This slim volume, a fairy primer if you will, is well worth your time if you want to complete or even begin your knowledge of the Irish supernatural. Let me leave you with something I had never considered: if, as in one piece of Irish lore, fairies are fallen angels, then it follows that Lucifer is king of the fairies. Chilling!

Olivia Armstrong

★★★★★

The Tomb of the Mili Mongga

Fossils, Folklore and Adventures at the Edge of Reality

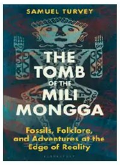
Samuel Turvey

Bloomsbury Sigma 2024

Hb, 304pp, £20, ISBN 9781399409773

Famously, the giant rat of Sumatra was the tale for which Dr Watson felt the world was not yet prepared. The giant rats of Sumba, however, are not a creation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but extinct mammals from another Indonesian island, whose fossil discovery plays an important role in conservation biologist Samuel Turvey's fascinating book.

Turvey first sets out not only the scale and variety of Indonesia (where a tenth of the world's languages are spoken and which consists of thousands of inhabited islands) but also explains how Sumba's lengthy geological isolation as an island has fostered its unique biodiversity. Not only can extinct species still be identified there through their fossil record (such as the giant rats), but Sumba's ecology also makes it possible for animals once declared extinct to be found alive.


SAMUEL TURVEY
THE TOMB OF THE MILI MONGGA
Fossils, Folklore, and Adventures at the Edge of Reality

Such notions of "living fossils" take on a different perspective as Turvey hears from Sumba's local population about "mili monggas": hairy, human-like creatures that some locals still recall seeing in living memory. Turvey and his team are intrigued – if animals once thought to be extinct can be discovered on Sumba, could mili monggas be real? Might the large bones found in a mili mongga tomb actually belong to a prehistoric human...? To untangle these accounts, Turvey draws upon histories of science, folklore and

contemporary anthropology, and maintains an open mind, making this work of great interest to forteans. Turvey even dips into cryptozoology – before dismissing it as a field of study, due to the gaps in the fossil record which undermine its theories.

Instead, his central method for interpreting mili monnga sightings involves making broader cultural comparisons. For instance, he explores how fossils were understood by other cultures before the concept of evolution became widely accepted and investigates whether the discovery of large bones inspired the creation of folktales about giants or wild men or contributed to stories that already existed.

Consequently, this book could easily have been a one-dimensional narrative: "Western biologist unpicks indigenous beliefs through rational scientific thinking." But it's a testament to Turvey's considered cross-disciplinary approach and clear writing style that the book is far richer than that. Nuanced and open-minded, Turvey assuredly explores a range of colourful contextual details while keeping his narrative securely in place. The book thus manages to be a well-drawn travelogue, anthropological overview, popular science page-turner and philosophical reflection on how change occurs: not only through the natural selection of gene mutation, but through the mutation of tales and traditions as they are passed on.

Ross MacFarlane

★★★★

Unburied

The True Story of Hannah Beswick, the Manchester Mummy

Hannah Priest

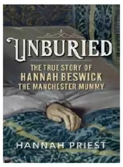
Manchester University Press 2025

Hb, 264pp, £25, ISBN 9781526175922

Visitors to the Manchester Natural History Society Museum in the 1830s could gaze upon an array of interesting exhibits, but perhaps chief among them was the "mummy" of Hannah Beswick, a local woman who – legend said – had been mummified due to her fear of being buried alive. Dying in 1758, Beswick would not be buried until 1868.

In *Unburied*, Hannah Priest seeks to uncover the truth behind Beswick's story and in doing so contributes to histories of the body, museums, and death and dying – as well as the history of folklore. The book skilfully weaves in Priest's research journey alongside that of her deceased subject, as she addresses the ethical conundrums of using the story of Beswick as a hook for a ghost story, her tale endlessly retold as a macabre local legend.

There is a long history of women being preserved for museum display; most often this was to highlight the "Otherness" of people like the so-called "Hottentot Venus" Sara Baartman, who was exhibited both in life and after death on account of her steatopygia (a large amount of tissue around the buttocks and thighs). In contrast to eminent individuals like philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who was preserved at his own request to illustrate the usefulness of human dissection, many of those lower down the social scale were not given a choice.



Quite where Beswick stands in this history, as a relatively wealthy woman from Cheetham Hill, Manchester, is an interesting question, and one that Priest explores in a highly engaging way. There is a large cast of characters to keep track of throughout the book, but this testifies to Priest's extensive research. She explores wills and diaries as historical sources, the development of natural history, the often bitter rivalry between Manchester and Salford, and even Jacobite politics.

Several possible reasons for Beswick's mummification are convincingly offered, but for me the significance of the book is much broader, as Priest interrogates our attitudes towards the dead. There is, she argues, a kind of "civic amnesia" that characterises urban development in Manchester, and it is a concept that can be extended to stories like Beswick's. Rather than acting as the ghoulish punchline to a local legend, here Beswick's life as a person is more fully contextualised, as Priest explores the creation of folklore and its functions for the living.

Although the conclusions drawn perhaps fall short of offering a complete "answer" to the ethical questions posed at the start, the reader is encouraged to ponder the human experiences of historical actors, the temporality of burial, and quite why stories like Beswick's continue to fascinate us in the modern day.

Jennifer Wallis

★★★★

Time Lords and Star Cops

British Science Fiction Television in the 1970s-80s

Philip Braithwaite

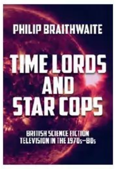
Manchester University Press 2025

Pb, 248pp, £20, ISBN 9781526187291

Sadly, this is not the nostalgic look at great British TV SF from the late-1970s and 1980s you might expect from the title. Rather than a celebration of dodgy sets and lo-fi special effects, this is a sociological study of the influence of Thatcherism.

The book is expanded from Braithwaite's PhD thesis and focuses on *Blake's 7, Sapphire & Steel* and *Doctor Who* in the Colin Baker and Sylvester McCoy era. He scrutinises them specifically for symptoms of neoliberal economics, social conservatism and Machiavellian thinking.

His thesis is that under Thatcher, British SF, like the UK, became a fractured world of individualism, amorality and duplicity, a shift from the moral certainty and social cohesion of the 1970s. (This may be surprising for anyone who remembers the 1970s). Certainly, there was a shift from the earlier series Braithwaite considers – *UFO, Space 1999* and *Survivors*. But trying to map these changes on to the political landscape is like monitoring economic progress via cereal adverts.



Squeezing everything into this thesis requires some contortions. Servalan, the antagonist in *Blake's 7*, a masterclass in stagey evilness by Jacqueline Pierce, is an authoritarian female ruler. Score one point for parallels with Thatcher. But an action-adventure series following a group of galactic outlaws is not rich in political theory. *Sapphire & Steel* is spooky, sexy and unsettling; scouring it for social signifiers is profoundly missing the point.

Braithwaite notes that producers and writers may "encode" their "preferred meaning" into a programme, but that viewers may "decode" the programme in many different ways, including the opposite of what was intended. This book does not ask the question of what the creators actually meant, which, in line with much SF, may have addressed bigger concerns. Or whether they were simply driven by a love of the subject matter, or, as commercial television, a need to win audiences.

This is a highly selective study that takes both itself and its subject matter far too seriously. If you like your SF commentary dry, cold and with the joy sucked out of it, this one is for you.

David Hambling

★★

Selected Letters to Kirby McCauley

April 1967-December 1980

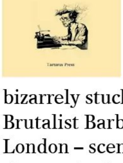
Robert Aickman

Tartarus Press 2024

Hb, 276pp, £45, ISBN 9781912586578

Strictly for completists, these are the letters the British writer of "strange stories" wrote to the man who became his US literary agent. Aickman's odd tales, braiding grubby post-war realities with Kafkaesque anxiety and dread, had a small but faithful audience. His undoubted snobbery about genre fiction and his sublime confidence in his own superiority in the mode always kept him a somewhat classic "minor" author – the missing link between Victorian "weird" writers and the New Weird of recent years.

Aickman's letters direct McCauley to his better stories for resale in the American market with a degree of hauteur, but when McCauley rather remarkably becomes the agent to a young Stephen King, Aickman – an olde-worlde gent bizarrely stuck in a flat in the Brutalist Barbican complex in London – scents money and new chances in the burgeoning horror market.



Roger Luckhurst

★★★

Old Moores' imaginal magic

Bob Rickard delights in this colourful compendium of magical wisdom in comic form, with added fun and in-jokes by two jolly japesters

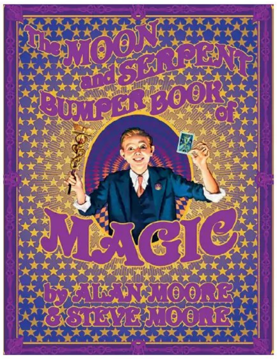
The Moon and Serpent Bumper Book of Magic

Alan Moore & Steve Moore

Top Shelf Productions & Knockabout Comics 2024
Hb, 340pp, £39.99, ISBN 9780861662890

You'd be forgiven for assuming that *The Moon and Serpent Bumper Book of Magic* is some modern reprint of (or an homage to) the type of *Boy's Own* seasonal volumes so popular through the noughties for both comics (eg the *Eagle*) and TV shows (eg the UK "John Steed" *Avengers*). This is all part of the plan!

Whether your interest is in British comics or in the various schools of modern magic (both of which feature in the writing careers of both Moores) this is a treat for you. Or – tricksters that they are – they advise: "If you're stuck indoors with nothing to do, why not become a magician." You need only one singular ingredient: imagination.



The MOON and SERPENT BUMPER BOOK of MAGIC
by ALAN MOORE & STEVE MOORE

Steve and Alan – in this venture, no longer master and pupil but perfectly matched magicians of the imaginal – present a masterclass on the essential nature of magic in all its forms and aims. What was once hidden, or secret, is laid bare in a healthy celebration of the subject's top-hat full of contradictions, meandering history and classical moments.

The claim, or impression, that schools of magic were radically different is itself an illusion, the Moores suggest, accepted only by the antagonistic or shortsighted. What may seem banal, obvious or even "childish" can, in this novel exposition, resonate with sympathetic symbolism. This is all about correspondences of the "as above, so below" kind, echoing the fortean view, that every "thing" is relative to other relative things on a spectrum between ideal opposites.

Foregoing a conventional structure, our jolly japesters weave a tapestry from a deceptively simple set of narratives. The first is "The Morning of the Mind" – a superb eight-page strip story, with no dialogue or text, depicting one of the most profound paradigm shifts of the "stoned-age". This highlights the most likely Palæolithic origin of shamanism, when mixing mushrooms and the necessity of a successful hunt resulted in glorious cave art that still astounds today. (It's great to see this striking monochrome artwork by an old friend, Steve Parkhouse.)

That leads into "Old Moore's Lives of the Great Enchanters" – a series of 50 one-pagers, each summarising a significant moment in the history of western magic. Next comes "The Adventures of Alexander" (of Abonoteichus) – an eight-part strip of the life and adventures (in the 2nd century AD) of the first historically verifiable magician (and con-man) and his sock-puppet-prophet, the god-serpent Glycon.

Spaced between them all is a six-part course on the basic principles of intentional creation – called "Things to do on a Rainy Day" – and a six-part mystical novel "The Soul, Dweller in the Abyss". Finally, there are numerous pages on magical resources – articles, alphabets, symbols and tables of "Correspondences" – scattered throughout, ending with a visual kit for assembling your own model Temple.

This splendid tractate – in the old sense of a formal systematic philosophical argument, but with added fun and in-jokes – ends with an account of its genesis.

As the postscript tenderly reminds us, it was around 1993/94 when the theoretical foundations of the "Temple of Marvels" were revealed. Over the course of convivial entheogenic-fuelled sleepovers (at Steve's Shooters Hill home) our amiable autodidacts became inspired by their tutelary deities.

By the time Steve departed this plane (in March 2014), most of the writing and art had been mapped out, to be overseen by Alan.

Given the depth and complexity of the *Bumper Book*'s contents, it is quite astounding that its progress over the years was known only to a few (chiefly its brilliant contributing artists, including Kevin O'Neill, John Coulthart, Rick Veitch, Ben Wickey and others).

Early on, despite a regular contact with Steve, I had no idea of the project's existence until he showed me its magnificently spangled cover, sporting the kind of illustration you'd expect on a box of fireworks or a young magician's first compendium of tricks. Now, the book is here and there is nothing quite like it, anywhere.

The "Moon and Serpent Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels", writes Alan, is "not actually a magic order or a school of art, but rather an approach to consciousness. The Theatre is the Universe and the extraordinary human mind in which that entire Universe is conjured and contained."

With these encouraging words, we are handed the keys to the Temple vestibule. For those intrigued enough to venture inside, a celebration of the "high" art of imaginal magic awaits.

★★★★★

Watto's Wisdom

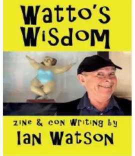
Zine & Con Writing by Ian Watson

Ian Watson

Ansible Editions 2025/lulu (https://ae.ansible.uk/)
Pb, 193pp, £12, ISBN 9781916508323

This is a collection of over 50 essays, reviews, memoirs, polemic and the odd SF convention speech by British SF writer Ian Watson, as well as fascinating commentary on how some of his novels were conceived.

In amongst all of these – arranged chronologically from 1977 to 2021 – are ideas of genuine fortean interest. There are musings on claimed UFO abductions. A very thoughtful 1980 essay suggests that the UFO phenomenon, like "the structurally similar encounters with fairy folk", is an altered state of consciousness, "tied into the roots of our cognition – our 'construction' of reality".



A 1997 essay on alien abduction mentions that "The recovery of buried memories by hypnotherapy is losing a bit of credibility these days" and that "many of these recovered memories may in fact be false memories". There are further musings on false memories.

A piece on Russian authors Arkadi and Boris Strugatski dismisses two fortean fields with "the thirst of people for miracles remains unfulfilled. Hence the contemporary fascination with pseudo-sciences such as UFO research and parapsychology."

The real gem in this book is a wonderful black-comedy account of the months Watson spent enduring Stanley Kubrik's at times utterly bonkers idiosyncrasies at his country mansion while writing, discussing and revising the storyline for what would eventually become the film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, based loosely on a short story by Brian Aldiss, who apparently loathed Watson. (Many of us remember how prickly Aldiss could be!)

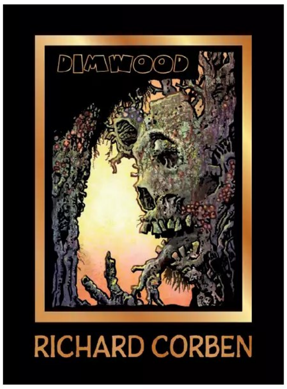
My main criticism is the too-small font in over-long lines of text, presumably to cram as many words as possible onto the page to keep production costs down; truly a false economy as it makes an at times delightful book physically difficult to read.

David V Barrett

★★★★

COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

STEVE TOASE PRESENTS HIS LATEST PICKS FROM THE WORLD OF SEQUENTIAL ART



Dimwood

Richard Corben

Dark Horse Books

Hb, 136pp, £35.99, ISBN 9781506739984

Xera returns home for a family funeral after many years away, but there are monsters lurking in the trees – and some of them might be closer than she thinks. Comic book legend Richard Corben had his background in underground comics, and that comes through in the art style of this gothic/folk horror. The woods are filled with menace, the mushrooms have an unsettling texture, and the monster design leans heavily into the grotesque. In *Dimwood*, the artwork is as lush as the forest that surrounds Dimwood Mansion. This is due in no small part to the colour design, both the colour work by Corben's daughter Beth Corben Reed, and the additional colour by José Villarrubia. The tones and hues throughout give the sense that the page will decay in your hand.

A gorgeous unsettling addition to the Richard Corben Library from Dark Horse Comics.

Hoodoo Comix: Conjure Man – Swampblood

Dr Bob Curran, Andy Paciorek

Full Moon Graphicks

£9 https://www.boxofrainmag.co.uk/

Among the Louisiana bayous, two children have gone missing. Detective Joe Hummels arrives from the city to look into the case. With Earl Landry he delves deeper into the humid landscape, and in one of the almost abandoned houses out by Bogue Creek they find ancient medicine and European ceremonial magic have come together to create something that might just finish them both. Their only hope might be John Bayou, the Conjure Man – if he can get there in time, and if his alliances and magic prove strong enough.

This is a comic that captures the claustrophobic atmosphere of post-Civil War Louisiana, as well as the underlying tensions that still linger. This sense of the landscape pressing in owes a lot to Andy Paciorek's almost photographic style of monochrome artwork. The use of shadows and blank space is gorgeous, and leaves space for the mind to fill the landscape with horror, perfectly complimenting Dr Bob Curran's sympathetic and unsettling writing, that ratchets up the tension throughout, You'll never look at a swarm of butterflies in quite the same way again.

The Idris File

Dix

Fantagraphics

Pb, 132pp, £24.99, ISBN 9798875000690

THE
Idris
File
BY
DIX

The latest comic from Dix opens with Idris and his mother on the train, on their way to the small Welsh fishing village of Bothelli by the Sea. When they get there, his mum is taking up a job as a housekeeper for Mr Miller. Bothelli is an unsettling place, with a touch of the Innsmouth about the residents, including Mr Eynon the shopkeeper, obsessed with his wife, Squiddy, who is obsessed with his dirty mags, and the girl in the cemetery, who has an excellent line in swearing.

There are plots, Nazis and hauntings, with Dix's art capturing the grotesque and unsettling nature of Bothelli and its residents. It also features one of the most creative uses of a Love Heart sweet I've seen in print.

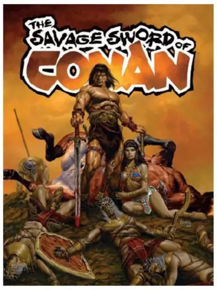
An excellent comic for those who like boy's own adventures and folk horror, but want something weirder, more disturbing, and more adult.

The Savage Sword of Conan Volume 1

Various

Titan Comics

Pb, pp208, £21.99, ISBN 9781787744318



I'm going to start this review with a confession. I have only a vague cultural awareness of Conan, and have never read any of the previous stories, whether the Robert E Howard originals or the later comic runs that set the foundation of this current volume. Saying that, I was very impressed with the three Conan stories here. Yes, the cover, with the warrior woman embracing Conan's substantial thigh, lets you know exactly what you're in for in terms of characterisation. Yet I was pleasantly surprised by the weirdness and horror that lurked within, whether that is the returning dead, the vast manifested gods, or lycanthropy. There is also humour, which doesn't feel forced. However, it was "Master of the Hunt", the three-part Solomon Kane story that really impressed me. A tale of folk horror, mythology, and morals that feels very contemporary while respecting the original character. The black and white artwork throughout is excellent, with a variety of different approaches, from Richard Pace's very sketchy style to the highly detailed art of Patch Zircher. A highly recommended collection from Titan Comics.

Tank Girl Colour Classics Book 1, 1988-1990

Tank Girl Colour Classics Book 2, 1990-1993

Tank Girl Colour Classics Book 3, 1993-1995

Alan Martin & Jamie Hewlett

Titan Comics

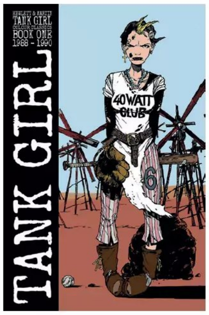
Pb, 128pp-144, £16.99 each

Tank Girl Trology Box Set

Alan Martin & Brett Parsons

Titan Comics

Pb, 88pp, £39.99, 9781787744929



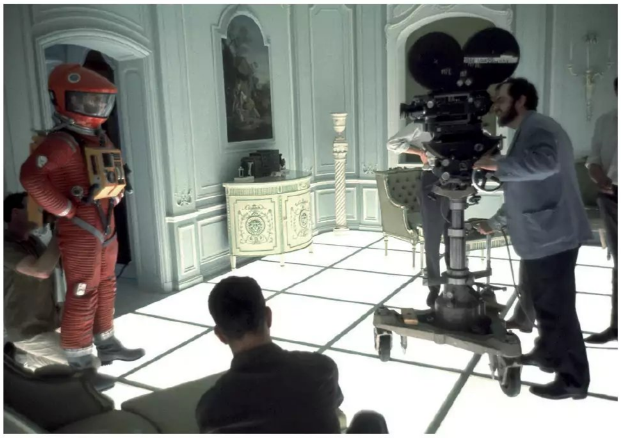
Six graphic novels in one review? Sounds a bit over the top? Maybe, but over-the-top is the main theme of this review. *Tank Girl* is an icon. Defining a certain kind of chaotic DIY style, she grew from the febrile imaginations of Alan Martin and Jamie Hewlett, finding popularity in *Deadline* and really summing up the Nineties. She was self-assured, chaotic, scatalogical and damn good fun.

Titan have collected together those Alan Martin and Jamie Hewlett comic strips, as well as a variety of *Tank Girl*-related ephemera, in three new volumes of tank-crashing and kangaroo-snogging.

While *Tank Girl* is solidly linked to the late eighties and early nineties, there have been many more comics since featuring her continuing adventures. As well as the classic comics, Titan are also releasing a new three volume set of the later *TG* stories, with Brett Parsons taking over art duties and Alan Martin still inventing new adventures for everyone's favourite outback-shredding, anarchic, tank pilot. *Tank Girl* is the type of comic where you can start anywhere, (as with Charles Fort and his circle...) but these new releases give you the chance to go back to the start, or catch up with more recent adventures. If I were you, I'd grab all of them.

Atomic dreams and nightmares

A new four-part history of science fiction makes for a good, if incomplete, introduction to the field



Wonderland: Science Fiction in the Atomic Age

Dir Adrian Munsey, UK 2025
Sky Arts

Flying saucers were very much the product of the atomic age. The contactees said they came here to stop us from destroying our world and the Universe beyond with our new-fangled weapons, while scientifically inclined ufologists often thought these craft were atomic-powered and had harnessed this energy for good rather than evil. Our own British Rail even patented a nuclear fusion flying saucer in 1973!

It helps to understand the wider cultural context of these reports and stories, and Odyssey Television's four-part documentary series *Wonderland* is a great introduction to the influence of science fiction on all forms of media.

Episode 1, "Mary Shelley to Isaac Asimov", considers the importance of early science fiction and how it warned of the dangers of technology to humanity. As an example, Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* in its 1954 film version shows a darker version of Captain Nemo than the original novel of 1870: a self-made man, much like our present-day Elon Musk, who constructs technological wonders yet comes to hate humanity. In "The Machine Stops" by EM Forster, in 1909, humanity is dehumanised and separated by technology. HG Wells goes further in 1914 with his fear of atomic warfare in *The World Set Free*. And in *The War of the Worlds*, "The beings that come from without are potentially you," according to SF author John Clute. Will we, like the attacking Martians, become intellectual blobs who have depleted all the resources of our planet?

> *There's an engaging sense of unpredictability throughout*

Episode 2, "Arthur C. Clarke to Ray Bradbury", shows how the Space Race instilled a sense of wonder that we could go beyond our planet and explore new frontiers. The Soviet and US space programmes dominated the headlines in the 1960s and distracted us from the horrors of atomic oblivion and the Vietnam war. Clarke's work showed how the use of technology would help us evolve into spirits of the Universe, while the likes of JG Ballard and Stanislaw Lem explored inner space and Ray Bradbury saw the dangers of future worlds dominated by technology.

Episode 3, "Margaret Atwood to Ted Chiang", shows how a new generation of writers challenged the predominantly male world of SF and its emphasis on the colonisation of space. In the late 1960s onwards more diverse writers and fans came to use SF to explore such issues as identity and gender. Aliens became the colonisers and a metaphor for the technology and religion that European nations used to rule the world. In films like *The Matrix* we are presented with alternative worlds where our very concept of reality is not only challenged, but there is "an androgynous and gender ambiguity" according to this documentary.

Episode 4, "Quatermass to Christopher Nolan", begins with how *Quatermass*, *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos* were all successful British films that explored post-war English secrecy and insecurity while mixing the familiar with the unfamiliar. Stanley Kubrick took SF film to greater levels of technological achievement and spectacle in *2001*, and the relationship of myth to science fiction was reinforced and popularised in the late 1970s by George Lucas in *Star Wars*. The films of Spielberg, Ridley Scott, the Wachowskis, Christopher Nolan and the Marvel cinematic universe have all shown us the wonder, spectacle and terror of the future. They question how we might embrace aliens, AI and the dangers of climate change.

Wonderland uses film clips and talking heads to tell this story, but as the episodes progress it drifts away from the premise of exploring "Science Fiction in the Atomic Age." Instead, it could quite easily be billed as a history of SF movies and their impact on popular culture. It misses out several significant movies that expressed fears about the atomic bomb. These include *Flying Disc Man from Mars* (1950), *The Stranger from Venus* (1954) and the notoriously bad *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959). In the latter, Commander Eros warns: *"With your ancient, juvenile minds, you have developed explosives too fast for your minds to conceive what you were doing. You are on the verge of destroying the entire Universe."*

The series could also have included the SF pulp magazine covers that spectacularly illustrated the dangers of the Atom. Plus, there is a whole slew of unmentioned cinematic monsters, like *Godzilla* (1954), that embodied anxieties about the nuclear age. Despite those reservations, this is an excellent introduction to SF cinema and its underlying themes.

Nigel Watson

★★★★☆

Escape from the 21st Century

Dir Yang Li, China 2024
Blu-ray and digital platforms

This is a coming-of-age story at heart, albeit one that is wrapped up in an incredible action/comedy/animated/thriller/romance/sci-fi manner. In 1999, three school friends acquire the ability to project themselves 20 years into the future, and back again. One finds he is a hitman for a crime syndicate, another has become an inept investigative journalist, and the third – the chubby, put upon Paopao – is now a chiselled hero.

The imagination and creativity at work here are off the scale. Sequence after sequence dazzles the eyes and bends the mind. The basic theme is as old as the hills, but the telling of it is absolutely brand new. It must be said the film does get wearing after a while because the ultrafast editing makes your head spin; but if you have even the slightest interest in today's pop culture you'll get a kick out of it.

Daniel King

★★★★☆

TELEVISION

FT's resident couch potatoes, **STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS** cast an eye over the small screen's current fortean offerings

The British Isles are replete with mysteries, but in the public consciousness one stands head, neck and humps above the rest. Like the Loch itself, what Nessie lacks in clarity she makes up for in longevity, from early St Columba claims to the modern era of plasticene heads on little submarines. All of this gets only a cursory mention as the BBC weighs in by focusing on the 1960s to 1980s and applying – as all good investigations should – social sciences as much as biological ones: couple this with the kind of montage documentary exemplified by the work of Adam Curtis and the result is *Loch Ness: They Created a Monster*.

John Maclaverty's film does a very neat job of contextualising both the history and the zeitgeist, with the inevitable clip of the ever-affable David Attenborough being enthusiastically open-minded about what lurks in the loch, before turning the lens away from the water and onto the shoreline, where different monsters were beginning to emerge from the gloom – principally those of ego and obsession but also of jealousy, vandalism and even threats of violence. The big personalities of the time all get a namecheck – Tim Dinsdale in his camouflaged dinghy, Adrian Shine looking like a hermetic æsthete in a tweed suit, the merrily febrile Japanese team and Robert Rines with his gizmos – but one name gets the spotlight: Frank Searle, an army veteran with a more than passing resemblance to Walker the Spiv from *Dad's Army*, an eye for the ladies and a frankly unbelievable hit-rate for photos of Nessie: as it transpires, there was a very good reason for this. The depths that Searle descends to exceed that of the loch itself as Nessie herself shrinks into the background and the tale becomes one about a very human beast, albeit one with its own mythical elements. From the start, Searle had established his own legend: his military background (he ran his shoreline camp like a miniature barracks) and many tales of his previous exploits, the tallness of which gradually became apparent, prompted scrutiny from other investigators and provoked an extraordinary sequence of retaliatory measures.

> *The depths that Searle descends to exceed that of the loch itself*

Meanwhile, out on the loch itself, the hunt spurs a global response and teams from all over the world assemble, Wacky Races style, to use evermore inventive and innovative methods to capture a happy snap of Nessie – a miniature submarine full of excitable Japanese people in highly flammable 1970s flared suits, Rines and his square-jawed crew of radar operators and others joined the already ragtag armada of more local eccentrics with varying degrees of success, some of which are debated to this day. At its heart it remains a tale of human beings racing to make their mark on history… catch it while you can. Highly recommended.

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth **REVEREND PETER LAWS** dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

Cinema has always had a fascination with what lies beneath the surface – of society, the body, and the mind. But in the late 1970s and 1980s, horror took an especially keen interest in the psychology of trauma, repression, and altered states of consciousness. Three films stand out as especially fortean in their explorations: David Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979) and *Scanners* (1981) and Wes Craven's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988).

The Brood remains, for my money, one of Cronenberg's most chilling achievements. While its infamous mutant children and hammer-wielding mayhem disgust and delight, the film's true horror lies in its vision of 1970s therapy culture gone feral. Experimental psychotherapist Hal Raglan (played with relish by Oliver Reed) encourages his patients to externalise their emotions, literally. In the case of Samantha Eggar's character, this means parthenogenetic offspring who act out her suppressed rage. It's uncomfortably intimate – part domestic drama, part psycho-horror – but always compelling. The final reveal still packs a grotesque punch, and the film's icy score and chilly Canadian atmosphere only add to the dread. *Scanners*, made just a couple of years later, continues Cronenberg's fascination with the mind, but this time through the lens of science fiction. Telepathy and telekinesis become weapons in a corporate espionage plot filled with popping veins and, of course, exploding heads. The film is great fun and features some of Cronenberg's most iconic imagery. Michael Ironside steals the show as the sinister Darryl Revok, while, unfortunately, the lead performance by Stephen Lack is, well, lacking – wooden and oddly inert for a movie about psychic warfare. Still, the central ideas remain rich, and it's easy to see why *Scanners* helped cement Cronenberg's place in genre cinema. Both films look gloriously gooey in these new 4K prints from Second Sight Films.

> *Telepathy and telekinesis become corporate weapons*

Wes Craven's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (Fabulous Films) takes us out of North America and into Haiti, blending zombie folklore with the real-world research of ethnobotanist Wade Davis (whose book inspired the film). Shot on location and featuring many local non-actors, the film feels vibrant and strange; its early sections are genuinely unsettling, steeped in mystery and cultural specificity. Sadly, it begins to unravel in the final act, defaulting to standard Hollywood horror tropes. Davis himself was unhappy with the liberties taken, and Craven's original cut – rumoured to be over three hours long – is a tantalising 'what if' for fans. Still, the film felt like a breath of fresh air to Eighties horror.

These three films explore terrors that come not from external monsters, but from our own inner landscapes. Whether it's rage turned flesh, minds weaponised, or consciousness altered by ritual, they remind us that the scariest journeys often begin inside our own heads.

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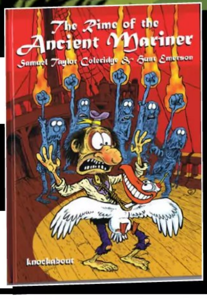
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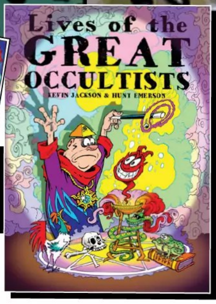
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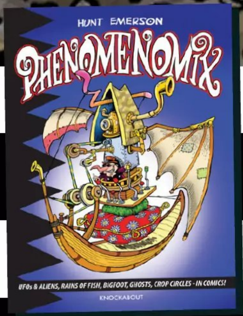
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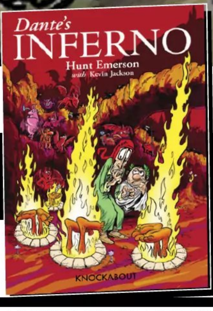
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The Green Children of Woolpit

I would like to congratulate John Clark on his excellent article on the famous Green Children [**FT455:38-43**]. I was also pleased to see he had given my own research, detailed in *Fortean Studies* 4, a fair hearing. The suggestion of the Jewish identity and cause of the green skin coloration being favism I found particularly interesting. However, the translation of Ralph of Coggeshall that I had used referred only to a green tinge to the children's skin, which could still be the usually suggested chlorosis.

Other historical references exist to green skin, notably in a letter by Sidonius back in the fifth century to the inhabitants of a town under siege in, I think it was in what is now Brittany, who turned as green as the weeds and grasses they were forced to eat to survive. There are also pictures of a seventh century Tibetan hermit which show him with a green skin said to be as a result of living on nothing but nettles.

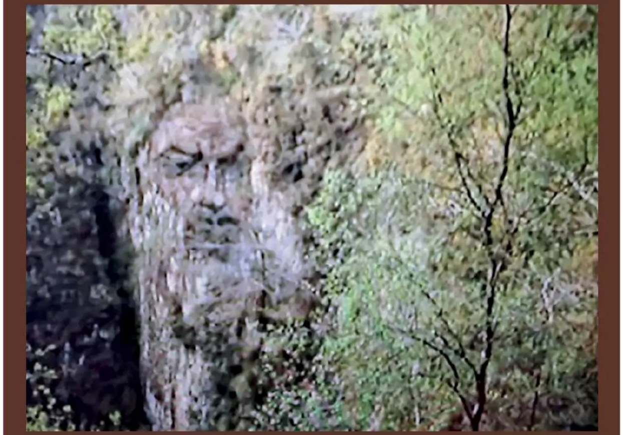
I look forward to reading John Clark's book and also that of Paul Edward Dutton for more information on their views and research.

Paul Harris
By email

Re: "Strangers in a Strange Land". I might be stating the obvious, and it might have been said and dismissed many times before, but the simplest answer to children being coloured dark green is by rubbing their skins with vegetable dye. A quick search of the Internet shows many examples of green dyestuffs that have been in use since ancient times – for instance, yarrow, onion skins, alder, heather and chamomile flowers. There are many other sources of green dye. In times of strife, and especially warfare, combatants darken their skin to avoid detection. Seems likely in dangerous times, children emerging from a ditch could have been put there for safety. What better way to keep them safe than by making them hard to detect?

John Fowler
Marlborough, Wiltshire

SIMULACRA CORNER



While watching *King Arthur's Britain with Professor Alice Roberts*, I noticed this Druid type face on the side of the Mulberry Hill Tin Mine in Cornwall, near Tintagel, where she was explaining that the mine had operated since before the Roman invasion until the early 20th century. I took a photo of the screen.
Andy Kelly, *Fylde Coast*

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH or to sieveking@forteantimes.com

John Clark's article on the Green Children of Woolpit does not mention the novel by Herbert Read, *The Green Child*, published in 1935, and still available at a reasonable price. Benjamin Britten almost certainly knew the author due to his connection with the arts in general, and may well have been inspired by the novel to consider it for an opera.

Bevis Sale
By email

Mystery Broadcast

I was very interested to read the letters regarding the mystery broadcast apparently from the future, shown in the late 1980s on British TV [**FT455:62**]. Mark Brownsell notes that he recalls similar experiences being published by FT readers some years ago – I was one of those readers who had a letter published (in 2013). [**FT306:69**]. It was reproduced in the FT Magbook *It Happened To Me Volume* 6, on page 26, with a similar account by Ben Torgersen.

I was also very interested to read Pete Morris's explanation and link to the broadcast on YouTube; however, whilst very similar, I remember warnings of terrible times ahead, with world peace eventually being achieved after much suffering for humankind. Perhaps that's just a memory projection, caused by the sheer weirdness of what after all may well just have been an innovative type of advertisement.

Nicola Bramah-Taylor
By email

Reading the resolution to the *Mystery Broadcast* discussion was one of my favourite things I've read in FT in many years [**FT455:62**]. The comments in the YouTube video linked by Pete Morris contain their own fortean mystery: while the broadcast is from 1989, various viewers are adamant they saw both this version, and a subsequent genuine pirate broadcast, in 1991, also during an ITV showing of *Romancing the Stone*. Further comments reveal there never was a 1991 showing of that film on ITV, suggesting this is an example of the Mandela Effect.

Felix Flicker
Bristol, Avon

Haunted Hoover?

On a topic which may be termed 'spooky science' or 'fortean physics' or 'electric voices', there are several examples of strange happenings involving voices transmitted in intriguing ways.

Mark Graham in "Racy Conversations" [**FT349:71**] relates how his elderly grandparents accidentally picked up on intimate conversations through their various electrical appliances. In the same column, Greg May relates how the actress Lucille Ball accidentally helped to locate a secret Japanese transmitter during WWII, when she heard voices every time she drove down a certain street in Los Angeles. The explanation being that the gold filling in her tooth was acting as a transmitter relaying the soundwaves over her car radio.

Mr Graham also refers to Lewis Hurst's letter "A Talking Bucket' [**FT346:65**] about a bucket of water which acted as a radio transmitter.

I have found another example: in her book *Time Travel* (Blandford, 1994), *FT's* Jenny Randles relates various ghostly and electrical occurrences in a house in fortean hot-spot Todmorden, which included voices coming from the owner's vacuum cleaner (page 59).

As the author writes: "These appeared to be snatches of conversations from people in the factory who made it, the driver who delivered it, the shopkeeper who sold it, etc." Ms Randles notes that when the owner moved it to a different room, the voices stopped.

Are there are any scientific-minded *FT* readers out there who can explain, in layman's terms, the reasons and possible explanations behind these anomalies?

Andy Owens
Halifax, West Yorkshire

Ancient Engineering

I'm afraid I don't buy Georgina Skipper's response [**FT454:59**] to my earlier letters about the Great Pyramid. Why would Khufu, or any other king, build a giant tomb which his corpse would have to wait decades to occupy if – as mainstream Egyptologists insist – pharaohs were paranoid about their mortal remains being desecrated? Surely, keeping even a mummified body in temporary storage considerably raises the chances of that happening. It may, of course, be possible to hide a body very securely in some remote place, but then why go to all the trouble (and cost) of building a gigantic pyramid? And the Tutankhamen analogy doesn't work either. Tut lived nearly 1,500 years later when tombs were much, much smaller and far easier to construct. My original point was that the large pyramids were either tombs, which they may well have been, and were constructed relatively quickly by methods unknown to us, or they had some other purpose, in which case the time factor was less important.

Geoff Clifton
Solihull, West Midlands

"The Map Room from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is not so far-fetched after all"

I've read the correspondence on Great Pyramid building with interest [see Geoff Clifton: **FT451:63**].

A comparison technique used widely in engineering is the analogue. I'd like to give two examples of modern-day construction that set new boundaries at the time. The first would be the huge gravity-base structures built for the North Sea oil and gas developments from the 1970s to the 1990s. The largest (Troll-A and Gullfaks-C) have masses well in excess of 500,000 tons and Troll-A is over 300m (984ft) high. There are many others, including the three now lacking their topsides in the Brent field. What characterises these structures is that they were built mostly on greenfield sites in the middle of nowhere (but convenient for the North Sea locations), using a workforce with no previous experience of the activity and living in temporary accommodation on site. They were also built quickly and with just one drama (one structure failed under construction). The rest have now withstood 50 years of the worst weather in the world without problems and may well be around for millennia. Will they be seen as a construction puzzle to a post-doomsday generation in a thousand years' time?

The second example would be the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, one of the highest structures in the world. I was privileged to work in an office in Dubai looking out over the construction site, and I watched the tower being built from the groundworks to the topping out. I was able to pay an extended visit to the site under construction. The workforce, formed mostly from people who were agricultural workers in their home countries, and moved to Dubai from locations across Asia, spoke over 80 languages. As a result instructions were mainly visual. Small teams were formed of common language speakers with a chargehand who could communicate with them and was able to understand English instructions. Activity was divided into worksites and each team would be briefed daily before work began (gruelling 12-hour shifts but welfare and safety were genuinely high priorities – accidents are bad business). Again, this temporary workforce was housed locally. The rate of construction was astonishing, but what struck me was that once the complex groundworks were complete the actual tower work was primarily repetitive, floor by floor, as it would have been for a pyramid. The key to both these construction achievements was a detailed design that set out the work to be done at each stage – the design is the clever bit; the organisation of the rest has changed little in millennia.

So what has this got to tell us about Ancient Egypt? Well, recent scholarship, research and excavation has made it clear where the materials came from, how they were shipped next door to the worksite, where the workers lived, and how they were organised. The logistics of managing 20,000 workers would be well understood by an administration that could put an army of 100,000 men into distant locations for years at a time. The pyramid demand was almost trivial by comparison to warfare.

The key for me is how they would know what to build – and thinking back to the modern examples, who used computer aided design of course, I'm absolutely sure there would have had to have been a model, probably down to the individual block level. This would have been constructed, agreed by the Pharaoh, then disassembled to the first layer and built up from there as the work progressed. I can imagine the foremen entering the model chamber to be instructed each day where they would work and what the objectives were. The model would include all the internal chambers to be constructed as the layers progressed so it would have needed to be secure, and access only given to those with a need to know – so it is probably deep underground in a special chamber.

As the work progressed, the workforce would lessen – remember the materials required are in inverse square to the achieved height of the pyramid. The model would be thought to be possessed of magical properties, and I strongly suspect it is still there – destroying it would surely doom the pyramid in the belief system of the owner.

The builder had to get two things right during the construction – the level and the alignment. That the Egyptians could do this is well proved by the many other structures they built. The one thing I can't get an analogue for is how they got the blocks up to the working level. I've read all the theories, the most likely one seems to be internal ramps (liquid concrete, as used by my modern analogues, is a tidy idea but the energy needs to make it would have been impossible), but lacking cranes of any size in the period it remains a fascinating puzzle. Still, structures like the Duomo in Florence (and Brunelleschi used a model, you can still see it) were built without having much lifting equipment as well.

So it does seem to me that the Map Room from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is not so far-fetched after all. Let's get that ground penetrating radar busy – of course any model room might be *under* the pyramid, which is certainly where I would have put it.

Paul Wood
Southampton, Hampshire

Golf balls and eggs

Regarding finding golf balls [**FT451:52-53**]: while staying at a farm in Warminster a few years ago, I went for a walk on a fine June evening around the nearby chalk hills of Battlesbury and Scratchbury, an area I knew well. It's on the southern edge of Salisbury Plain in the general area of the now-historic UFO years of the 1960s and 1970s. The famous skywatching site at that time, Cradle Hill, is to the west. Between Battlesbury and Scratchbury is the lower Middle Hill. Alongside it is a military road, which is open to public access as far as the boundary of the training area of Salisbury Plain, a short way beyond. The two main hills have Iron Age hillforts and Bronze Age barrows, and Middle Hill has a barrow on its summit. Although not as well-known or visited as Cradle Hill, Middle Hill did have its own mystique and anomalous light phenomena, etc. It was also easier for visiting with more car parking space. In the early UFO days it was called Star (or Starr) Hill.

That evening I noticed on the western slope of Middle Hill (OS grid ref. 906448) lots of small white areas which at first I thought were grass-free areas of exposed chalk, as chalk is prevalent and outcrops are seen everywhere around. As I got closer I found that it was not chalk but dozens of golf balls as if scattered at random and widely spaced, all over the hill slope. This was most curious. The farmer whose house we were staying at is a member of the local golf club on Arn Hill, next to Cradle Hill and over a mile from Middle Hill as the crow flies. The club was not missing a huge number of golf balls. Of course, it would have been possible for somebody to have collected them up from elsewhere, driven to Middle Hill and spent time throwing them over the hillside. But what would be the motive? There are far too many to put the blame on crows thinking they were other birds' eggs!

Raymond Cox
Halesowen, West Midlands

The answer to the golf ball mystery [**FT451:52-53, 453:68**] is simple: foxes. This was a topic of discussion when I worked on a hunting magazine a few years ago. Apparently, foxes see golf balls lying around, think they are eggs, and make off with them. They are creatures of habit, and often return to the same spots sometimes quite a distance away from where they found their prize (presumably near a golf course). When they realise they have a golf ball, rather than an egg, they leave it where it lies, which may explain the dumps of multiple balls described.

Christian Saunders
By email

With reference to recent reports of the mysterious appearance of golf balls: for about a decade, from the mid-2000s onwards, I worked a couple of plots at Tredegar Allotments in Dartford, Kent. This vast triangular site, which potentially had around 116 10-rod (250 square metre) plots available, was surrounded on all sides by third-rail electrified railway lines, with access limited to a locked bridge. Effectively, nobody without a key could enter the site.

When I arrived, only about seven plots were being worked, the rest being overgrown by hawthorn bushes and brambles. As I began to clear land, I came across dozens of golf balls, some clearly having seen prior use, others obviously brand new. As more people took up surrounding plots, they too encountered this golf ball bounty, which was limited to around five adjacent plots.

On the other side of the railway closest to this area there is a small park, and I could only assume somebody must have been chipping the balls over the railway and onto the allotment, or more worryingly, throwing them at trains. However, there were never any balls on the immediate embankments nor any on the track, and this discovery of golf balls also involved finding them on areas of recently cultivated soil, so it had to be an ongoing activity.

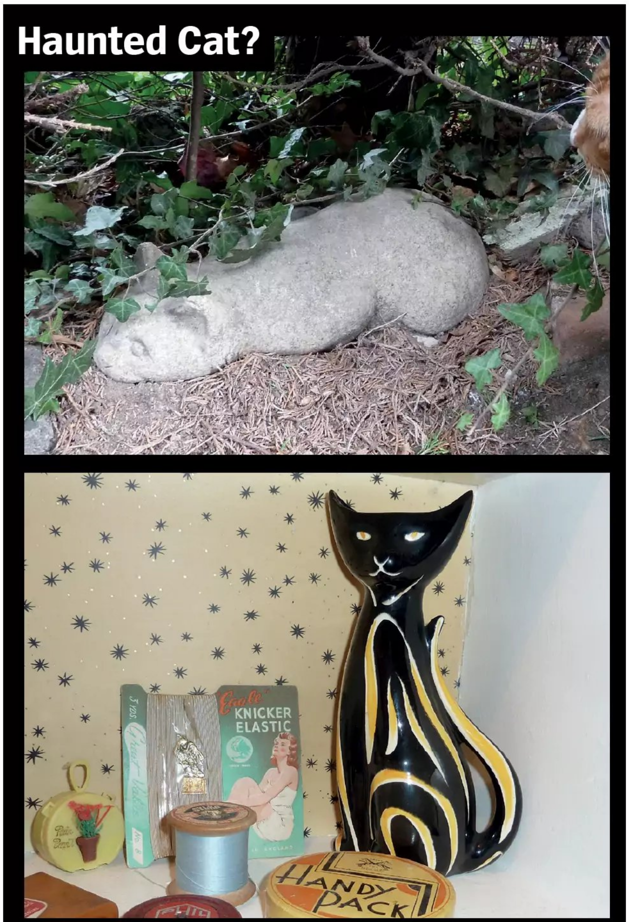
After some months, the golf ball largesse ceased, only to be replaced by something even weirder. On the other side of the site, new plot holders began to discover dozens of fresh hens' eggs. These were an entirely recent addition to the landscape, since they had been concealed in areas of recently tilled land. Even stranger, all had the standard British Lion stamp on their shells.

A colony of foxes lived on the abandoned part of the site, so were the obvious culprits. But where were the foxes getting entirely fresh, *processed* eggs from? To get them on site, they would have needed to carry them in their mouths for some distance – but from where? Were they possibly responsible for the arrival of the golf balls too?

I left Dartford in 2015 and moved to another part of Kent. There, I was part of a start-up allotment. Since the surrounding fields were full of horses, I came to an arrangement with one of the owners to take away a large manure heap for use in composting. At the very bottom, I encountered half a dozen golf balls… Alas, though, no fresh hens' eggs!

Barry Cross
Ashford, Kent

Haunted Cat?



While clearing the garden shortly after moving into our new home, I found an ornamental stone cat hidden under overgrown fir trees at the bottom of the garden. Being a cat lover, I decided to move it to a more prominent position in the garden.

The same day my partner went into the spare room that she uses as her office, (the cats and I do not go in that room, and the door is always kept shut.) On entering the room my partner was immediately aware that a 1950s china cat had been turned round and was not now facing into the room, but looking into the corner of the cabinet! She asked me if I had moved it, which I hadn't – but I told her I had moved the stone cat in the garden that day.

Having thought about it, we were of the opinion that the stone cat was probably a grave marker for a once-loved pet. We put the cats back to their previous positions, and neither has moved since.

Previously an old lady had lived in the house for 60 years and was also a cat lover. So who knows – was she, or her cat, upset by me moving the stone cat?

Chris Ransted *by email*

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Children's voices

In *Women in White* [**FT450:30-35**], Alan Murdie revisits the phenomenon of the female spectre. Rebecca Batley explores specifically *Legends of the Grey Lady* in the same issue. I cannot claim that one of these discarnate beings is related directly to my experiences in 1971, but shared geography and a local tradition may hint at a connection. That year, inspired by *Liege & Lief* (by the sleeve notes as much as by the music), Fairport Convention's seminal folk-rock album from 1969, I travelled to Padstow in Cornwall for the annual *'Obby 'Oss* celebration in May. On the way, I diverted from the A30 road and found myself at a place I later learned was called *Fingle Bridge*.

That August, I made the journey again but this time with Steve, a friend from schooldays. We arrived at Fingle Bridge, amazed that tourist coaches could navigate the narrow roads to reach the site. There, we enjoyed a Devon Cream Tea at the Angler's Rest pub as kids played in the River Teign. The afternoon being pleasant, we crossed an Elizabethan packhorse bridge, one of many to bear the title *The Bridge That Leads To Nowhere*, and took a walk downstream, re-imagining Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* – we were quite pretentious in our early twenties. We saw the ruins of a mill not 100 metres from the bridge, its leat and wheel still visible among dense undergrowth. On our return around 5pm, we noted that the coaches had left and the place was now beautifully tranquil, valleyed between forested hills and overlooked by Prestonbury Castle, an Iron Age hill complex.

When the pub was open, we had dinner and a couple of pints of the excellent Whitbread Trophy bitter. Deciding against moving on, we spoke to the licensee, Mr John Price, whom, we learned, had been friends with the Reverend William Keble Martin, the writer of *Concise British Flora in Colour*, a definitive work of which I have a copy. We asked if overnight parking of our Bedford Dormobile was permitted. With his approval, we crossed the narrow bridge, leaving not too much Dormobile paint on the stonework, and parked in an open grassy area. Steve could be asleep before his head hit the pillow but I, then as now, have trouble sleeping, so I lay in my uncomfortable bunk listening to the sound of breezes in the trees and the occasional *belling* of randy stags.

"The sound of laughter with the hint of singing, jolly like a nursery song but with no words distinguishable, and getting closer"

About 1am I heard children's voices, seemingly approaching from downriver. Knowing that only Mr Price, his wife, their daughter and two of the daughter's university friends were at the pub and that the nearest settlement in that direction was Steps Bridge, about three kilometres [almost two miles] away, I found it odd that children should be out at that unlikely hour. The sound was of laughter with the hint of singing, jolly like a nursery song but with no words distinguishable, and getting closer. I lifted a blind but could see only the silver dappling of moonlight even when the voices seemed just metres from the van. Then the tone changed and I heard an urgent "Help, help!" which, I admit, was shocking. The sounds faded and I felt at the time it was as though the volume knob had been turned slowly to nought rather than cut off. I crawled outside and saw nothing. Steve slept through it all.

In the morning, I was still troubled. We had coffee at the Angler's Rest. Framed on the hall wall was a facsimile of a newspaper cutting detailing the story of a family who established a sawmill there in the 19th century. It burned down in 1894. It chilled me to read that. I asked Mr Price about the event, specifically if anyone had been injured or worse. Everyone escaped, he assured me, but the family, with six children, suffered financial ruin. I told him nothing of my experience, wishing not to appear delusional.

On another trip to Fingle Bridge in 1985, I was with my then partner and our young children. We walked the Fisherman's Path which runs upstream to the ersatz mediæval Castle Drogo and met Mr Price out for a stroll. He did not remember me, but we chatted and he told us of a local legend dating from the 17th century of the *Grey Lady of Chagford*. A Chagford girl, Mary Whiddon, was due to marry but was shot and killed by a jealous suitor during the ceremony. RD Blackmore adapted the tale for his 1869 novel, *Lorna Doone*. Whereas Lorna survives Carver Doone's attack, Miss Whiddon died. Her short life and tragic end are commemorated in the village church. Tales persisted of a Grey Lady, said to be her spirit, seen on the Hunter's Path which, though almost impassable every time I have been there, follows the opposite bank of the river upstream. A story he had been told by a witness was of a wedding in a posh house in Chagford in the 1960s and an unexpected young female appearing in a photo of the assembled guests, wearing what was described to him as not unlike an Empire Line bridal gown. No one could recall seeing her except in the photo.

It was time to tell him of the children. That opened a page in his memory. He told us that, for some years, a BBC producer would get away from London when he could for a weekend's fishing. One night just before closing, the angler rushed into the pub looking uncharacteristically shocked. After a fortifying whisky, he told the company that he had heard children singing and approaching him along the Fisherman's Path, and probably at first thought it inappropriate, just as I had, of parents to allow such licence. When the sound was close by, he shone his torch and saw nothing. He abandoned his tackle on the bank and fled to the pub. Unlike myself, he had heard some of their words and quoted, to the best that Mr Price could recall of what the BBC man told him:

Pansies for her bower
Daisies for her hair

Mr Price recognised it as in keeping with songs that children would sing in the old days as they accompanied a bride to the church on her wedding day.

On a damp April night in 2011 (while Prince William and Kate Middleton were enjoying *their* nuptials), I called in on my way to Padstow a couple of months shy of 40 years after that first experience, and attempted to engage the clientele in conversation about those matters. They were not forthcoming in speaking to the outsider and no one knew of John Price. I was last there in March 2014 with my current partner having visited the megalithic site of Merrivale in research for a series of novels we have written. The Sun shone after a wet few days and the area looked gorgeous. The pub has been renamed the *Fingle Bridge Inn* but the bridge is still there as is the ruined mill and the singular magic.

I'm not a believer in ghosts, gods or Little Green Men but after that – and a few other experiences – I had to accept that the Universe has tricks up its cosmic sleeve to suggest a construction more subtle than simply mechanistic.

Paul Carter Block
By email

Plug puzzle

When I returned from work one day this week, upstairs in my bedroom I asked Alexa to play some music, but there was no response from my Amazon Dot Echo. I looked down and the plug had been removed. This is a big heavy plug, securely fitted horizontally into an extension lead and there's no way it could have fallen out by itself.

Before I'd left for work the same morning I had asked Alexa to play some music by Morrissey – one of the tunes that came up was a spooky little tune called "Ouija Board, Ouija Board". Perhaps the previous occupants of the house weren't appreciative of the music! I live alone and nobody else would have been in the house – a two up, two down late Victorian terrace built in 1900, which I've lived in for around 20 years. I've never had any other 'spooky' experiences there and have always felt it had a nice atmosphere.

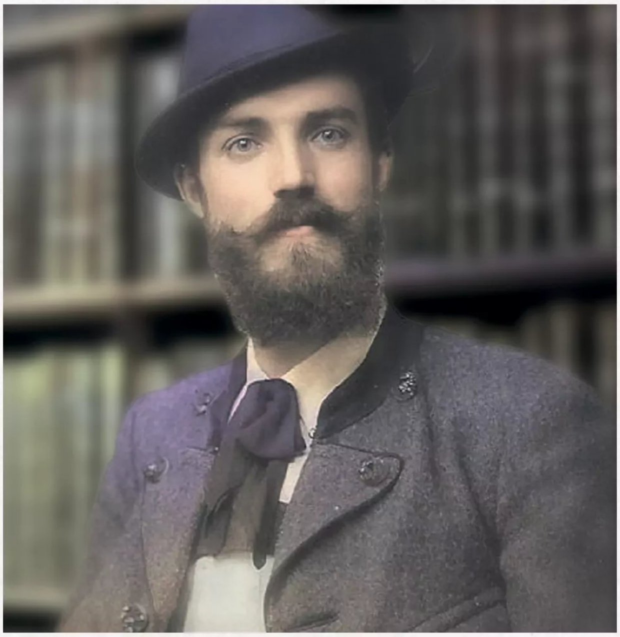
Incidentally, the song "Ouija Board, Ouija Board" was recorded at Hook End Manor, an Elizabethan manor house once owned by David Gilmour. It's rumoured that he and his wife fled the house abruptly after experiencing ghostly phenomena there. The video to the song was also filmed there and features Joan Sims of *Carry On* fame playing a spirit medium conducting a séance.

Mark Hopper
Hull, East Yorkshire

Dig the Austrian

Way back in 1969 when I was 15, I used to have sleepovers at my best friend's house. In the morning, we would discuss and analyse our dreams. One morning I told her that I'd had the strangest dream which featured one of the prefects at our school. We only knew him by sight and certainly had never spoken to him.

In the dream I was sitting down at a low table and turning over the pages of a big picture book. The book was called *Fish Under the Sea* and was a collection of photos of fish that lived in the deep oceans. As I looked, a shadow fell across the page, and I was aware of someone bending over me. Then in my ear I heard the words 'Dig the Austrian'. I looked up and saw I was in a library and standing at the librarian's desk was a man dressed in a Tyrol hat, short tweed jacket and lederhosen. I laughed and looked up to see who was talking to me, and it was this prefect from the sixth form. My friend and I talked about this odd dream, and then we forgot all about it.



Around four years later I bumped into the guy in another city, where he was at university, and I was working. We started dating. One day he had to go to the university library to pick up a book. I sat down to wait and started to leaf through a coffee table book. I started to feel odd, the book was about deep-water fish, and when he came back and leaned over me, I knew exactly what was going to happen.

"Dig the Austrian", he said in my ear. I felt numb but looked up anyway and there was a man standing wearing practically the same outfit as in my dream from four years earlier. My boyfriend saw my face and asked what was wrong. I said we should go to a phone box (no mobiles then!) and I would explain.

I think he thought I'd gone mad. But I phoned my friend and put the receiver between my boyfriend and me so that he could hear. I asked her if she remembered the dream about him years ago, and she laughed and immediately said "Oh yes, 'Dig the Austrian!"'

Georgia Love
By email

> **"There was a man wearing the same outfit as in my dream from four years earlier"**

What did he say?

My daughter and I were in Liverpool in 2024 by the docks when I decided to stroll down the cobbled ramp to the water's edge, to watch the swans. In this space by the water's edge (the width of approximately four cars parked next to each other) was one other person. This other person had a fancy camera and I assumed he was a photographer. I decided to keep to the far side of the ramp so as not to disturb him or the swans. It was so quiet down there, the noises of traffic and conversation just seemed to stop as if someone had switched a radio off. I watched the swans and one peeled off, lazily swimming towards me. I could see in my peripheral vision that the photographer was coming my way, so I politely just ambled away. Shortly after repositioning myself towards the other side of the ramp I could see him, again in my peripheral vision, coming my way for a second time. I was slightly irritated by this as I just wanted to stand and enjoy the view. After a few more moments (and a few pictures of the swan) I decided to walk back up the ramp. My daughter, who was sitting on the wall at the top and was just watching me, was laughing. When I got closer she said "Why were you ignoring that man?" From where she was sitting she could clearly hear him speaking to me. I heard nothing. I didn't look directly at him so could not see he was talking to me. It was if I was in a sealed off spot with no sound whatsoever but there was no feeling of an absence of sound, just nothing.

To this day my daughter believes I was ignoring him but, for me, there was nothing to ignore, everything was seemingly normal, just no sound.

Su Owen, neé Deighton
Brighton, East Sussex

Some inexplicable incidents

Weird things do sometimes happen and I admit to being a cynical old fart. First-hand experience trumps armchair reporting.

- I once stood next to Uri Geller at a private event in Eastbourne. I did not stand in front of him but at his side close enough to touch him, so I could see exactly what he did. He was given an item of canteen cutlery. He rubbed the neck of the fork between two fingers a few times and it flopped over. I could not explain how this was done.
- Some years ago at a *Fortean Times* UnConvention, ASSAP were given space for paranormal testing. A lady ASSAP member invited visitors to move a jeweller's balance in a glass case (like a laboratory balance but with a heavier pan). A lady in her 20s looked at the balance (without touching the table) for a few moments – and the pan moved down. She quietly said, "Was that all right then?" The ASSAP lady seemed unimpressed. As for me standing nearby, I said to myself: "That was [expletive] amazing."
- Many years ago I visited St Winefride's well located at Holywell with my late partner Joy. This lady saint was said to have lived in North Wales around AD 700 and was decapitated by an angry suitor. St Bueno put her head back on her neck. Allegedly, she survived and the healing well dates from this event.

On a whim I gave Joy a 20p coin and asked her to throw it into the pool from the other side and make a wish. So on opposite sides we both threw our 20p coins into the water. They snaked and zigzagged to the bottom but ended up touching exactly side by side. I never did ask Joy what she wished for, but would be surprised if anyone could repeat this coincidence.

Lionel Beer
Hampton, Middlesex

LETTERS

Clever trick

The preponderance of poltergeist cases involving children may suggest that in many instances, the 'haunting' is actually cheeky children causing trouble.

I was reminded of this after my wife and I thanked my mother-in-law for having kindly babysat our children, aged five and three, last weekend so we could spend an evening away. Apparently, as can inevitably happen with children sometimes, the behaviour wasn't absolutely perfect and the sentence passed down by granny was bed without a story. Fair enough. It was related to us that the children accepted this fate, but having been tucked in they listened out and when their grandmother took a shower, snuck out of their room and placed a Bluetooth speaker karaoke set they'd got for Christmas under her bed.

Biding their time, after she was tucked up in bed herself with the lights off, they started broadcasting ghostly noises to the speaker from its paired Bluetooth microphone. Adding to the effect, the speaker has pulsing LED lights which caused the room to suddenly be bathed in ethereal green light.

"I jumped out of my skin", she told us. Little wonder. I had to pretend to be outraged on her behalf, but I don't mind admitting the ingenuity did raise a wry smile.

Good evidence for the resourcefulness of the young, even very young, wanting to get their own back with a little help from cultural ideas about the supernatural.

Oliver Lane
Crewkerne, Somerset

American creature

I am of partial Mohawk Indian descent through ancestry in the upper New York State area, so I read and explore whatever I can of the area and history. This tidbit is from the diary of French trader Pierre Espirit Radisson, who was captured and adopted by the Mohawk in 1652-53. This part of his narrative concerns a war party excursion with a Mohawk companion in the area of southern Canada.

"I will not omit a strange accident that befell us as we came. You must know that as we past under the trees, as before mentioned, there layd on one of the trees, a snake with foure feete, her head very bigg, like a turtle, the nose very small att the end, the necke of five thumbs wide, the body about 2 feet [60cm], and the tayle of a foot and a half [46cm], of a blackish collour, onto a shell small and round, with great eyes, her teeth very white but not long. That beast was a sleepe upon one of the trees under which wee weare to go, neither of us ever seeing such a creature were astonished. We could not tell what to doe. It was impossible to carry our boat for the thicknesse of the wood, to shoot att her wee would att least be discovered, besides it would trouble our company. Att last wee weare resolved to goe through att what cost soever, and as we weare under that hellish beast, shee started as shee awaked, and with that felled downe into our boat, there weare herbs that served to secure us from that dreadfull animal, we Durst not ventur to kill her, for feare of breaking our boat. There is the question who was most fearful? As for me, I quaked. Now seeing shee went not about to doe us hurt, and that she was fearfull, we lett her be quiet, hoping shortly to land and to tourne upsid downe of our boat to be rid of such a devill. Then my comrade began to call it, and before we weare out of the little river, our feare was over, so we resolve to bring her to the fort, and when once arrived at the great River, nothing but crosse over it to be neare our fort. But in the meanwhile, a squirrell made us good spoart for a quarter of an houre. The squirrell would not leap into the water, but did runne, being afraid of us, from one end of the boat to the other. Every time he came nearer, the snake opened her wide mouth, and made a kind of a noise and rose up, having her 2 fore feet uppon the side of the boat, which persuaded us that shee would leave us. We leaned on that side of the boat, so with our owers thrusted her out, we seeing her swime so well, hasted to kill her with our owers, which shee had for her paines. The squirrell tooke the flight, soe wee went, longing to be with our comrades to tell them of what wee have seen."

Sounds a bit like an alligator, but for the extremely cold winters in that part of the country.

Mark van Allen
Watkinsville, Georgia

The theory of everything

In the week I went to see the multiverse-based film *The Theory of Everything* (with my physicist friend – "I'm glad I don't have to explain THAT to anyone"), two events occurred involving me for which multiverses bleeding into each other could be one explanation. Amongst an infinite number of explanations course.

1) A friend of mine told me he'd been sitting on a train, bored, and was 'earwigging' two strangers, men of about my age, talking about pantomimes. One of them (slim, flat cap and a goatee) said, "I always remember a pantomime sketch about a radio phasing in and out and the characters talking in the gaps. It was written by a good friend of mine, Graeme Kenna." Wracking my brains about it I remembered I did indeed co-write that sketch – about 35 years ago. I didn't know the listener back then and we'd never discussed panto. I texted a lot of friends asking had they talked about pantomimes on the Chester train? The one who affirmatively answered and matched the description of the man said he indeed had (and couldn't pin down when) but it had been with his daughter, not a male friend, and although he did remember that panto, he hadn't referred specifically to it or to me.

2) I went Christmas shopping with my wife about eight miles from home. We decided to go for a Costa coffee (other portals are available). We had been to our local branch before but never this one. As I lined up at the counter the woman serving changed over, and she said, "Is it your usual order, Americano with milk and black tea with no milk?" I looked at her. She said, "Wait a minute, I don't know you do I?" "No, but that is my order." She looked perplexed and said, "So how did I know what your order was?" I checked with her and she had never worked at another branch where she might have served us. She had no idea why she was so sure this was my (fairly non-standard order).

Graeme Kenna
Wallasey, Merseyside (and everywhere else, somewhere).

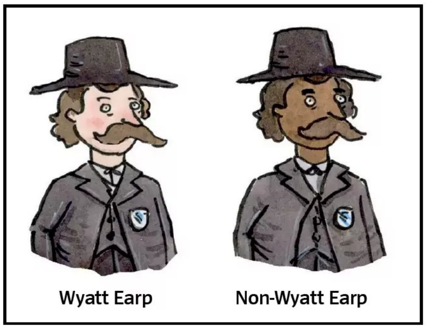
Harvey, the giant rabbit

Alex Kashko mentions a film featuring a six-foot-tall white rabbit invisible to everyone except the human star of the film James Stewart [**FT455:63**]. The film, of course, is *Harvey,* on general release in 1951, an adaptation of an earlier musical play written by Mary Chase.

A couple of fortean points: Kashko calls the rabbit – whose name is of course Harvey – a *puca,* and this term (or *pooka* or *pwca*), for a mischievous spirit in Ireland, is used in the film itself. The rabbit is never seen in the film – though a still photograph does exist of a seated Stewart with the standing rabbit – but looking up information about the film, I did find a comment online on *Reddit* that someone was sure they had seen the film and that at the end James Stewart and Harvey are seen walking down a road. This is found under the discussion point: "r/Mandela Effect"!

See: www.reddit.com/r/MandelaEffect/comments/1g62ok6/harvey_the_rabbit_appears_in_the_film/?rdt=37205#:~:text=I've%20watched%20the%20movie,his%20sister%20Vera%20freak%20out.

Norman Darwen
Lostock, Lancashire



PETER A KING

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WHY *FORTEAN?*

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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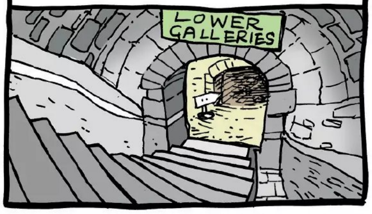
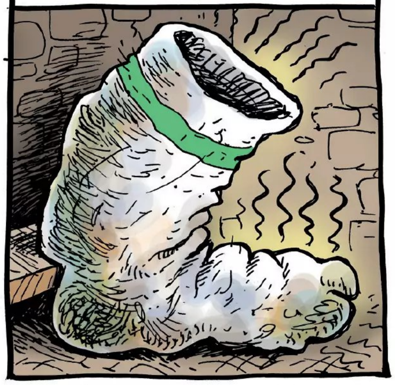
PHENOMENOMIX CABINET OF CURIOSITIES 4

HUNT EMERSON

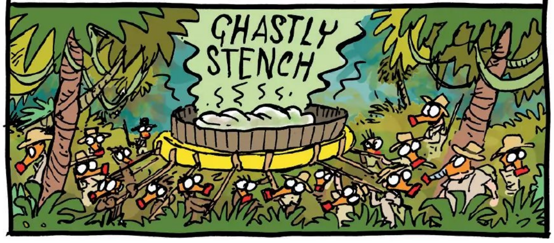
DEEP IN GULLY BULL'S CABINET OF CURIOSITIES IS A LOCKED CHAMBER CONTAINING TRULY HORRIFYING EVIDENCE OF THE EXISTENCE IN REMOTE FORESTS OF GIANT PRIMATES!


LOWER GALLERIES

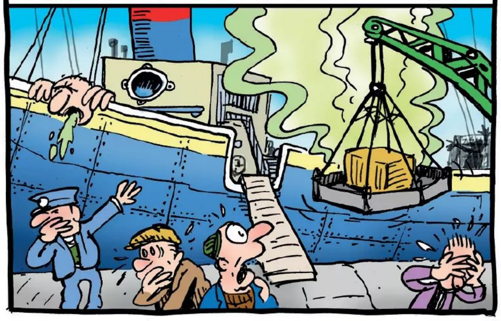
IT IS... A BIGFOOT SOCK!



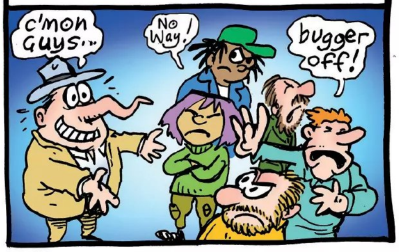
DISCOVERED BY BULL IN THE TRACKLESS WASTES OF CANADA'S FOREST, THIS ARTIFACT WAS TRANSPORTED WITH GREAT DIFFICULTY TO HIS STUDIO IN THE GROUNDS OF FORTEAN TOWERS...


GHASTLY STENCH

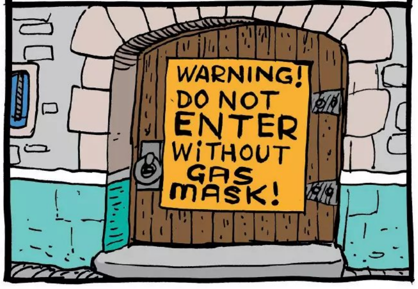
THE SOCK WAS THAT OF A BIGFOOT ADOLESCENT MALE, AND WAS PUTRID AND STINKING BEYOND BELIEF!



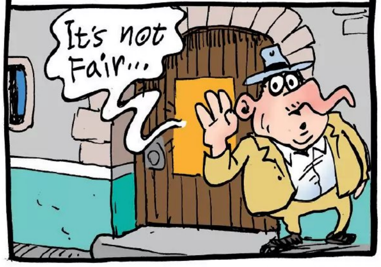
THERE MAY HAVE BEEN A MATCHING SOCK IN THE VICINITY, BUT BULL'S TEAM FLATLY REFUSED TO CONTINUE THE SEARCH!


c'mon Guys..
No Way!
bugger off!

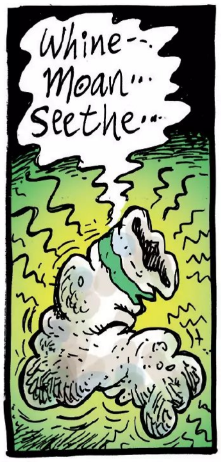
THE SOCK WAS INSTALLED IN THE CABINET OF CURIOSITIES, WHERE IT IS KEPT UNDER STRICT PRECAUTIONS...


WARNING! DO NOT ENTER WITHOUT GAS MASK!

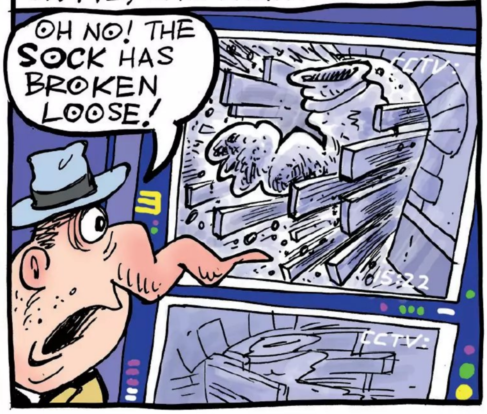
AT SOME POINT, THE TEENAGE TOECAPPER BEGAN MAKING WHINING NOISES OF SELF-PITY...


It's not Fair...

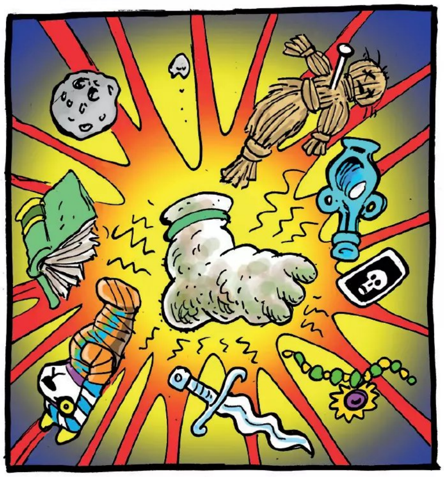
THE WHINGEING GREW, UNTIL THE SOCK BECAME A SEETHING, STINKING, COTTON/RAYON-MIX MASS OF RESENTMENT!


Whine.. Moan.. Seethe..

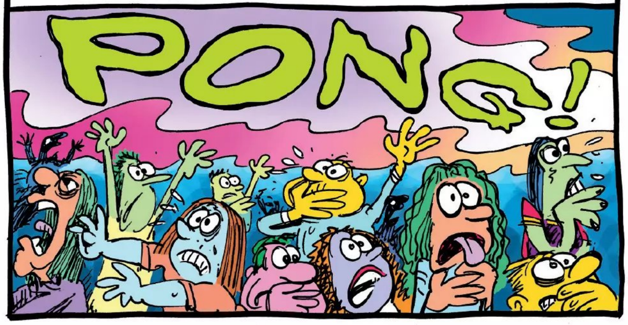
UNTIL, ONE NIGHT...

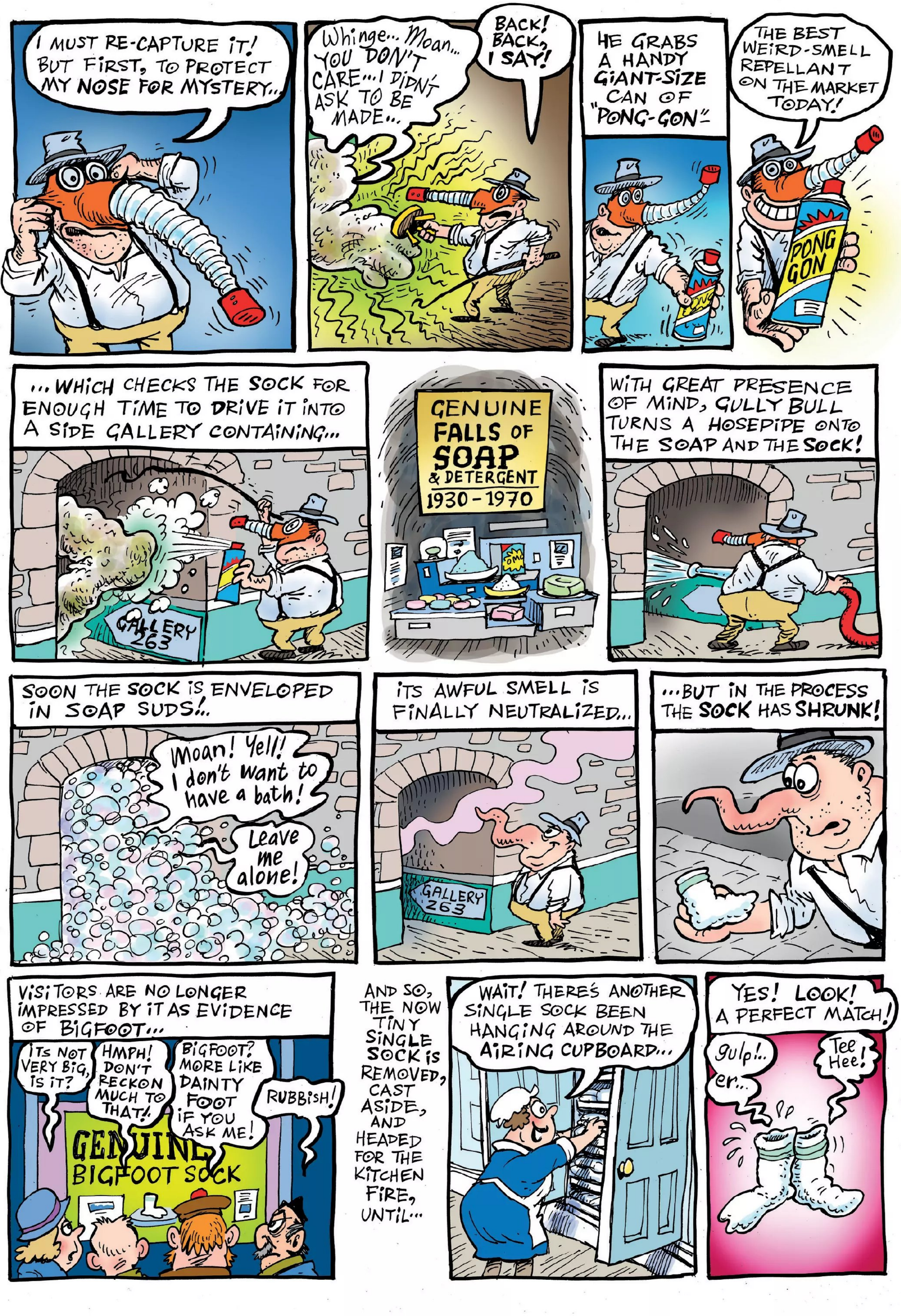

OH NO! THE SOCK HAS BROKEN LOOSE!
CCTV
05:22
CCTV

IT RAMPAGED THROUGH THE CABINET OF CURIOSITIES, HURLING ASIDE METEORITE FRAGMENTS, MUMMIFIED CATS, WITCHES STRAW DOLLS, BOTTLES OF POLTERGEIST...



...INFECTING THE CABINET'S CORRIDORS WITH PONG, AND CAUSING PANIC AND NAUSEA AMONG VISITORS AND STAFF ALIKE!




I MUST RE-CAPTURE IT! BUT FIRST, TO PROTECT MY NOSE FOR MYSTERY...
Whinge... Moan... YOU DON'T CARE... I DIDN'T ASK TO BE MADE...
BACK! BACK, I SAY!
HE GRABS A HANDY GIANT-SIZE CAN OF "PONG-GON".
THE BEST WEIRD-SMELL REPELLANT ON THE MARKET TODAY!
PONG GON
...WHICH CHECKS THE SOCK FOR ENOUGH TIME TO DRIVE IT INTO A SIDE GALLERY CONTAINING...
GALLERY 263
GENUINE FALLS OF SOAP & DETERGENT 1930 - 1970
OMO
WITH GREAT PRESENCE OF MIND, GULLY BULL TURNS A HOSEPIPE ONTO THE SOAP AND THE SOCK!
SOON THE SOCK IS ENVELOPED IN SOAP SUDS!..
Moan! Yell! I don't want to have a bath!
Leave me alone!
ITS AWFUL SMELL IS FINALLY NEUTRALIZED...
GALLERY 263
...BUT IN THE PROCESS THE SOCK HAS SHRUNK!
VISITORS ARE NO LONGER IMPRESSED BY IT AS EVIDENCE OF BIGFOOT...
ITS NOT VERY BIG, IS IT?
HMPH! DON'T RECKON MUCH TO THAT!
BIGFOOT? MORE LIKE DAINTY FOOT IF YOU ASK ME!
RUBBISH!
GENUINE BIGFOOT SOCK
AND SO, THE NOW TINY SINGLE SOCK IS REMOVED, CAST ASIDE, AND HEADED FOR THE KITCHEN FIRE, UNTIL...
WAIT! THERE'S ANOTHER SINGLE SOCK BEEN HANGING AROUND THE AIRING CUPBOARD...
YES! LOOK! A PERFECT MATCH!
gulp!.. er...
Tee Hee!

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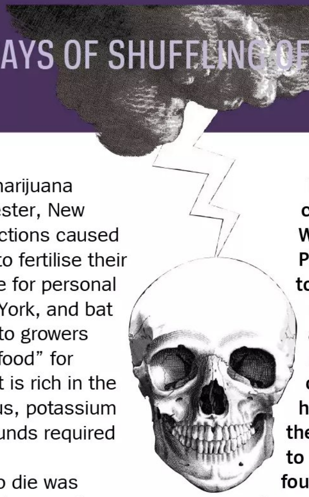
FORTEAN TIMES 458

ON SALE 15 MAY 2025

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



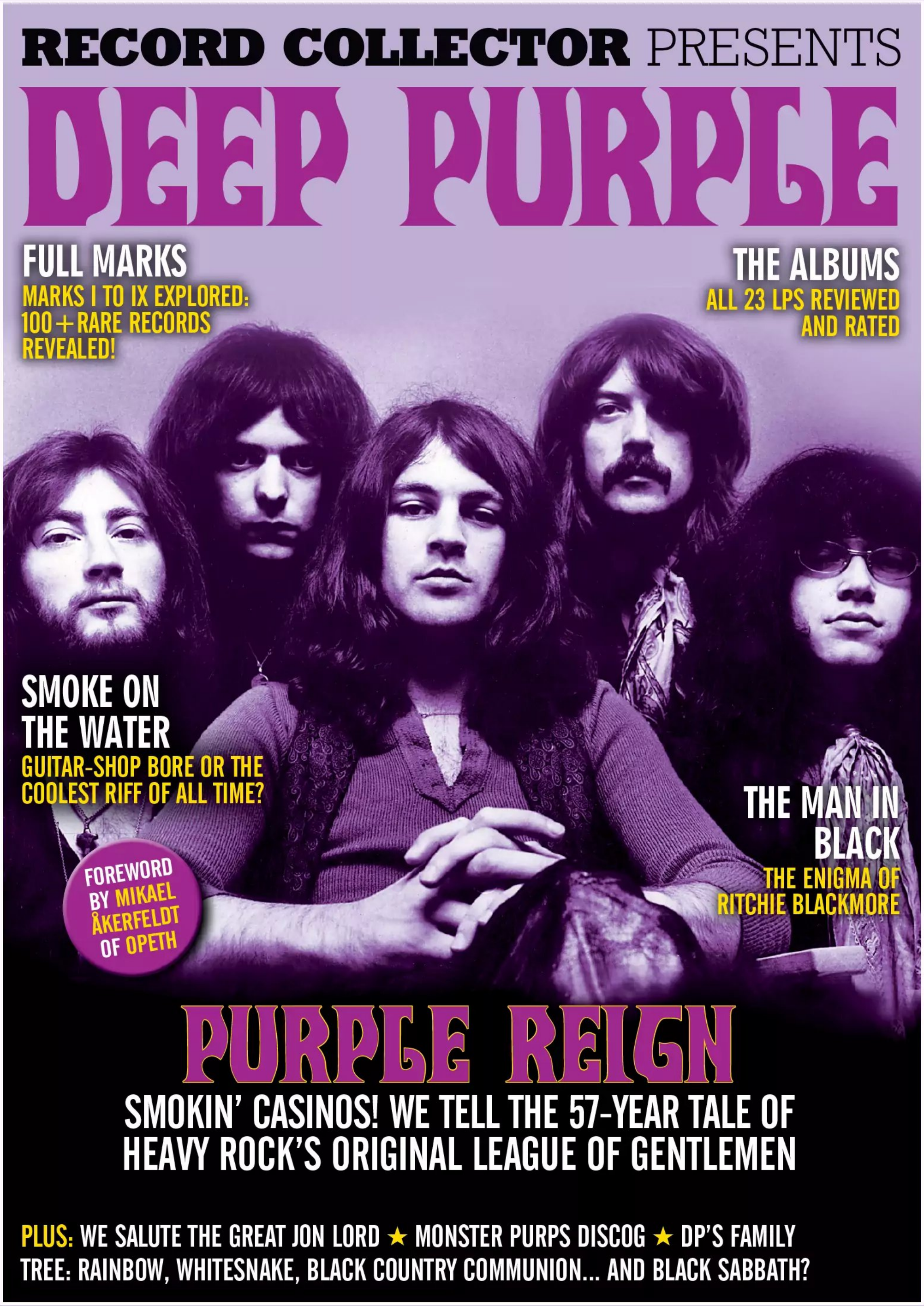
Two unconnected marijuana growers from Rochester, New York, died from infections caused by bat guano used to fertilise their crops. Growing dope for personal use is legal in New York, and bat guano is promoted to growers as a “natural superfood” for cannabis because it is rich in the nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and organic compounds required by the plants.

The first grower to die was a 59-year-old with a history of emphysema – severe lung damage that frequently results from heavy tobacco use – who regularly used marijuana. He also had rheumatoid arthritis, for which he was taking medication. After suffering from a chronic cough and losing weight drastically over a six-week period, the man went to hospital when he began to find it increasingly difficult to swallow. Scans showed a suspicious growth on his larynx, prompting doctors to order a biopsy, but instead of the suspected cancer, they discovered that the man was suffering from a histoplasmosis infection. This is a fungus found in most bird and bat guano, and up to 75 per cent of people in areas where it is to be found have been infected at some point, but 90 per cent of those never show any symptoms; for people who do, it is rarely fatal. Underlying illnesses of the kind the Rochester man suffered, though, can make the infection far worse, and potentially lethal. Although he received hospital treatment, he continued to find it increasingly difficult to breathe, and after two weeks “he ultimately transitioned to comfort care and died” according to doctors.

The other Rochester resident was 64 and turned up at hospital after losing 35lb (16kg) over several months and developing a chronic cough. He was found to have low blood sodium, could not eat properly due to bad dental hygiene, and had previously had bypass surgery to increase blood flow to his legs. He too was found to have histoplasmosis, but “remarkably, the patient reported a heavy bat infestation of his attic with a thick layer of guano that he inspected on multiple occasions intending to use it as fertiliser for his cannabis plants,” doctors said. The man went home after apparently successful treatment, but returned a month later with abdominal pain and it was found that the infection had returned and was stopping the blood flow to his gut, ultimately leading to death from intestinal complications. *miamiherald.com, 17 Dec 2024.*

Police were asked to do a welfare check on 75-year-old Rebecca Westergaard at her home in Pataskala, Ohio, after she failed to turn up at her niece’s home near Akron on Christmas Day and family members had not been able to contact her. When officers arrived at Westergaard’s home, they found her dead on the steps with severe bite injuries to her legs. Inside the house they found a large and aggressive pig; they also found two more pigs on a neighbour’s property and concluded that Westergaard had been attacked and partially eaten by the animals. The coroner determined that Westergaard died from bleeding out due to extensive injuries inflicted by livestock and ruled her death as accidental. Local Police Chief Bruce Brooks described the case as a “horrible, horrible situation” and said that it remained under investigation, as the law was not clear on what should happen to the pigs. “If it was a pit bull or a Rottweiler, then we would know the answer right away, but being farm animals, it’s just not something we’ve ever dealt with here,” he said. Meanwhile, in Madrigalejo, Spain, a 35-year-old farmhand, working alone to unload a truck full of pig manure, died when, for unknown reasons, the entire mound fell on him. He was not discovered by colleagues for some time. They called emergency services who dug him out, but by then he was already dead. *cleveland19.com, 7 Jan; surinenglish.com, 7 Jan 2025.*

Residents of Bareilly in India visiting the nearby Ramganga river were surprised to find a partially submerged car stuck in the riverbed. Closer inspection revealed that it contained three dead occupants, so they called the police. Officers discovered that the deceased were Kaushal Kumai, Vivek Kumar and Amit Kumar, security guards who worked locally. The three men had been to a wedding in a nearby village and had been using their vehicle’s satnav to find a shortcut home. This, though, told them to drive over a bridge which had been partially demolished after severe flooding in 2022, but which had inadequate signage explaining this. At the speed they were travelling, the men had no chance of stopping when the bridge ended, and they drove straight over the edge, crashing 25ft (7.5m) into the riverbed below, dying instantly. *metro.co.uk, 25 Nov 2024.*



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